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MY WIFE

MY WIFE

CHAPTER I

HOW IT STARTED

RAWSON looked round on us and said: "To think there's a book in every one of you, and that you daren't write it!"

We demanded what he meant.

Ours is a small and select Club, and when we heard a literary johnny was trying to get in, we rose as one man and black-balled him. He came just the same.

It seems that after passing through publishers' hands one's hide becomes impenetrable. We thought he was a confirmed cynic, but discovered he was merely the author of fifteen humorous novels. At least he said they were humorous and we preferred to take them as read, for he was the gloomiest-looking fellow I ever saw. He said they had been published by fifteen different publishers—'fifteen, all swine,'—was how he expressed it.

He was only too ready to tell us what he meant.

He had the nerve to look at a dozen sober, God-fearing middle-aged men of immaculate lives, and reply:

"Human nature wouldn't let you write 'em. Ye gods, what ghastly books they would be!"

I was roused at that. I had had all the advantages of a Public School education, and my spelling and grammar were strictly in accordance.

Rawson said that wasn't what he meant. My grammar and spelling could be put right; the thing lay deeper than that. It would be the hypocrisy of the books which would be so ghastly. He said that we were not so much full of the big vices—which people rather liked owning up to—in books—but of the silly twopenny-halfpenny ones that we would not acknowledge even to ourselves. He declared that when a man or woman—and women were the worst—set out to tell the story of their own lives, well they *told* stories. They were so biased that consciously or unconsciously they lied all the time. They simply could not help making out the best case for themselves and the worst for other people. Poor human nature, how petty it was!

"There isn't one of you," he asserted, "who could write down the simple happenings of daily life without prejudice, your relations with those around you, your ideas, words, acts. What you think—" he paused, and looking round us added, "or don't

think. You will accuse others and excuse yourself. It will never be your fault. You will never be just a silly potty little person." I caught his eye and found it offensive. "Your book will be just one long complaint of others. You will figure yourself in heroics, exaggerate this; omit that."

I told him, with some justifiable heat, that I should not think of doing such a thing.

"Try, and see," he urged.

I retorted I could easily prove him wrong, only I hadn't the time, and the others said exactly the same.

"The material lying handy in your relations," he wailed, "and all wasted! I used up mine long ago: they only held out to the eleventh novel. Lots of you must have relations that would make a cat laugh, and what are you doing with 'em? Letting 'em rot! It's wicked. Your wives for instance—there's a mine of wealth in wives. Other wives like to read about 'em and other husbands; bachelors and spinsters to see what they have, or have not, escaped, prospective husbands and wives to learn how not to. Pessimists like to say, 'I told you so!' and optimists, 'Good Lord!' There you have your public at one go."

"But——" someone ventured.

Rawson took no notice. "All men who have been married for years," he went on despairingly, "rich in material, chucking it away, while a poor

devil like me can't afford to marry at all. Hanged if it's fair! *My* wife wouldn't have been wasted. I'd have got a tragedy as well as a comedy out of her. All you have to do is to tell the absolute truth about yourself and your wife, and there's your human document."

One of us, Angus Macpherson, remarked cautiously that our wives might not like us to tell the truth about them. I think he voiced the secret thoughts of all. I know the same idea had struck me, only I had not cared to be the first to mention it. I'm one of your chivalrous sort of beggars.

I pointed out that if one had rather a dull ordinary sort of wife the book would be dull and ordinary too.

Rawson persisted it would be more of a human document than ever, 'stamped with the impress of truth and tragedy.' He seemed to think we were more likely to make tragedies out of our wives than comedies, though he did not know quite all, and Gertrude he had never even seen.

"Have a shot," he urged almost passionately, "it doesn't need brains and literary talent to tell your own story, or I wouldn't ask it. Just pen and ink, that's all, and truth. Try to be as fair to your wife as to yourself. Of course there's no harm in treating her feminine weaknesses with humorous lightness. One does not want all grey realism."

I asked what on earth would be the good of it.

He replied in his cynical way that it might help some starving publisher to live.

I think we were all prepared to let the deserving publisher starve, till Rawson bet there wasn't a man among us with the spunk to try. I can never resist a bet. I took Rawson's—bad luck to it!

I soon discovered I had struck the kind of job that seems almost too easy—till you start. I made a sort of rough diary of daily events, absolutely fulfilling *all* the conditions Rawson had declared impossible. When I found the deserving publisher I was prepared to copy it all out, and polish my periods—if I found time—and correct generally.

I regret to say I struck twelve undeserving publishers before the thirteenth—ominous number!—agreed that if I would make a fair copy and so on, he would see what could be done.

Oddly enough the objections of the twelve publishers were all different and diametrically opposed. On no point did they agree.

Rawson says they never do. It's one of the things that aren't done in the trade. One man's meat is always another man's poison. "Publishers are like doctors," he went on. Suppose you had a complaint. You could get plenty of entertainment by going to various doctors and following exactly opposite courses of treatment, always preserving as a *bon bouche* the final doctor who would discover you had not the complaint in question, never had

had it, never could have it. Publishers unfortunately, he added, were less entertaining. They got their fun out of you, not you out of them. The ones that declined you might seem bad, but you found out when it was too late, that they were angels compared to the devil who got you.

Poor old Rawson! He was no end jealous that a mere amateur should get accepted right away, but I bore with him. I knew it must be a great treat for him to have another author's book to talk about all the time. I did ask him what he joined our Club for. He said he had joined it for sympathy. None of us wrote; we hadn't the brains. No author ever gave another author sympathy; he only gave him rotten advice. Then he asked, in quite a nasty tone, how much I was paying to get published. I said, I was being paid—sevenpence up to 2,000 copies, and tenpence afterwards. The book was to be six shillings.

"And how much do you expect to make out of it?"

"About ten thousand pounds."

Rawson laughed as if I had said something funny. "That will take a few tenpences, won't it?" he gasped wiping his eyes, "Where do you expect them to come from? I doubt you getting into the second thousand or making the price of a new suit. You'll be jolly lucky if you do. The public will get a novel from their library, but they prefer

to borrow or steal it. They only buy it at the very last resource."

I struggled out of the slough of despond the wretched fellow kept pushing me into.

"I've friends——relations," I said.

"After the book is out you'll have neither," he returned. "In one's first days of publication one looks to relations and friends to bestow tenpences upon one in a shower. In one's second venture one realises that one must do the bestowing oneself—in the shape of free copies——"

"But——"

"Whether you do or not you are bound to be wrong. If you send them a copy they are insulting about it—fancy wasting postage on that these bad times!—if you don't they are furious, and have to buy firelighters. First novels always break up all friendly relations——"

I left Rawson to hold forth to an empty room. He might say what he liked. I had written the human document. I had told almost more than the truth. If I had been a little hard on myself, I had been more than kind to others. I had shown myself without prejudice, one who suffered perhaps, but suffered heroically and in silence. I had been chivalrous to my own wife and after twenty years of matrimony! Can man dare more?

The nearer the book got to the day of publication the more elated I felt. I marked off the Cal-

endar until the date I was to become rich and famous.

But a very strange phenomenon overtook me. I could only look upon everybody in the light of a possible tenpence. Odd how few I felt certain of! Would John stump up? Well I was pretty sure of John. There are times in a man's life when there's nothing for it but to part and look pleasant. But Gertrude——even out of the housekeeping? I doubted it. Pam and Rupert though their allowance was prodigal? Not on your life! My Club friends? They would stand me a dinner on Publication day, and wish it success, but read it, let alone buy it—Good Lord no! Help it by mentioning that they knew the author, an awfully clever and witty fellow? Not much! Wild horses would not be able to drag from them the fact that they numbered an author among their acquaintances; besides they would be dead certain in their own minds that it was rot because they knew me.

No, the ten thousand pounds would not come to me *via* my friends. I could see that it would take some making; that I might even have to be content with half.

How many who start will read to the end without missing anything? That I shall never know, and perhaps it is just as well. I am told that the usual novel reader walks into the library, reads the last chapter of a novel, and if she—it is usually she

—finds the heroine in the hero's arms on the last page, she may take it home to read the first chapter to discover their names, and a middle one to find out how they arrived at the only chapter that matters—the last, but as for reading it word by word, when there are dozens of other books to be 'tasted' in the same manner, well life isn't long enough.

If you've read as far as this it's something I suppose, and a small triumph in its way. You wouldn't have read this chapter at all if you had guessed it wasn't part of the tale, just the Preface, which means 'To be omitted' as every novel-reader will tell you.

If you've left off before you've got even as far as this, I don't think much of your manners. You're a rude devil, that's what you are. If I am calling a lady names it's unfortunate, but I do not see that I am to be blamed for her behaviour, sorry as I may be about it.

I don't expect your tenpence—oh, you may believe me or not!—but I *do* expect your attention. After all, you might remember it's more fag to write a book than read it—even a book like this.

Well I've done my bit: now it's up to you to do yours.

CHAPTER II

HOW WIVES ARE TOO MANAGING

I THOUGHT they were talking of the dog, and buried myself deeper in my paper. When I bought Togo I made myself responsible for his shape and lineage, but I fail to see why I should be held responsible for his character. How was I to know he would turn out such an utterly aggravating unreasonable little brute? To hear them discussing him was enough.

I was reading in the library and had become suddenly conscious of the voices on the lawn. . . . . "You know what he is!" wailed my wife. "It makes it so difficult. We simply *must* find something to keep him quiet——— something that will take him away a little," she added firmly.

"What about a Special?" asked my daughter Pamela.

I rubbed my eyes. Was it trains, and not dogs they were discussing? That's the worst of hearing a conversation in the middle. I often find my wife's conversation difficult to follow, inconsequent, and leaving so much to the imagination. Her friend

the Vicar seems to like it; myself I find it at times a puzzle without either end or beginning.

"No," she now said decidedly, "that would not suit me at all. You know how draughty bridges are———"

Yes, bridges went with trains. I was at least on the trail.

——"And how easily he catches cold, and gives it to everybody else. Of course I have to have it first. Then, when it's gone round and ended with the kitchen-maid,—as it always *does* end somehow, —I start all over again."

I confess I was puzzled. 'Ended with the kitchen-maid!' What—apart from the lives of our plates and dishes—ended with the kitchen-maid?

"Still a Special, this weather," began Pam, "and he could resign by the winter——"

"No," said my wife disposing of the idea whatever it might be, "there's no uniform."

Then I saw daylight.

There's to be another flag-day and a procession, and of course my wife and daughter are in the thick of it. Gertrude has had the time of her life since the war. They were obviously going to make Togo do something patriotic, carry the flags or wag his tail at the right people, or something. I felt rather uneasy. I knew Togo so much better than they did, and could see him worrying the flags, wagging at the wrong people, and biting the right.

And he would perform all of these functions with gusto. I also saw myself getting blamed for the whole thing.

Then Rupert—need I say I had been allowed no voice in the Christening of either of my children? I had wanted Pam called Rosaleen,—began to make strange noises, and I realised he was about to speak. He had come to that state of life, in his case seventeen, when the male voice ceases to be under control. At one moment it reached to the stars; the next it descended to the Pit. We suffered it, not gladly, but because we had to. It was in the high shrill voice he said:

"We'll make him a Georgeous Wreck. Then he'll have his Sunday route marches to play round with, an' a uniform to make him buck about, an'" here his voice fell from the stars to that which was under the earth, "look what it will do for his wind an' figure."

"No," said my wife decidedly, "that would not suit me either. Somers the butcher, and Blunt the grocer, have joined and are corporals or something high up, and they would address him by his surname and give him orders——and extra drills or cells for disobeying them, and all the time Somers sending tough mutton, and Blunt charging exorbitantly for butter! In the trenches it's different. Lady Mugg was saying only yesterday that it was considered quite the smart thing to be a private in

the new army, and very much more select than being an officer. No, he could go as a private into the trenches, and willingly, but never into the G. R's——"

Then I realised they were not talking of Togo. They would have treated him with more respect; he had already bitten several people. No, they were discussing me, Me, the head of the household, the Master!

I burst out at the library window at them and said:

"Damn your impudence!"

Of course this was addressed to Rupert even if I happened to catch Gertrude's eye. I trust I know better than to damn my wife.

Rupert started see-sawing inside, and answered:

"Well, pater, we thought you ought to do somethin' patriotic as well as us. We're slavin' all the time at gettin' up things, an' goin' to special matinées, an' flag-wagging, an' it don't look the thing, it don't really, for you to sit down an' do nothin'."

I was speechless. Sit down and do nothing! I who provided the funds! I who worked like a slave to provide the money for these people to fling recklessly away! I who——.

"Rupert doesn't mean you don't do things in your office hours," said my wife quickly, "of course you do, quite a lot, don't you? Though it is fortunate that Brown is such a splendid manager, and dear,

you should not swear before the children. Rupert back from school, and Pam who would have been out if it hadn't been for the war!"

"If Pam has gone in that's the first I've heard of it." I own I was annoyed, and perhaps my voice showed it.

"Oh pater, what a chestnut!"

It's a very extraordinary thing, but modern children, and wives too, seem to have no respect for the master of the house. Rosaleen would not have wanted to make a Georgeous Wreck of me, or stick me on draughty bridges or in the trenches.

Discussing me as if I were too old and too imbecile to be allowed a say in my own disposal! After all I was only forty-nine—whatever Gertrude might be.

I said I considered it a pretty patriotic thing, and quite enough too, to keep my own wife and family; that goodness knows it was little I got out of it but work and worry; that——

"Dearest you should not have come out into the sun in your heated state without your hat."

I asked my wife what she meant.

She said everybody was hot on an afternoon like that even if it was only the beginning of April; that anyway if they weren't hot they soon got so. That a head needed some cover. Women are not very logical, and Gertrude is no exception to the general rule. I have only known one woman who

was logical, but she was different in every way. If only——

"I suppose you have been asleep in the library?" asked Pam.

"On the contrary," I told her, "I have been reading the leading articles on the only day in the week I get a few hours to sit down——"

"Don't you sit at the office?" asked my daughter with an impudent smile, "I've often wondered what you *did* do there?"

I saw her mother give her a warning look, and I felt displeased with both of them.

"The things I do are quite beyond your comprehension."

"Oh dad! How naughty!"

"Dearest, do get your hat!" urged Gertrude.

"At the office," I continued looking round, and taking no notice of foolish interruptions, "things are in the melting-pot."

"Good gracious," giggled Pam, "can you make toffee in it?"

"The old order changeth," I went on sternly, "the staff has all gone save Brown, and been replaced with women of all ages, from what I believe are called 'flappers' to well—ladies of mature age——"

"How ripping for you, old thing," interrupted my daughter, "I mean the flappers, not the ladies of mature age. Do you teach the flappers to flap,

and is that why you've taken to being late? Can't you see them all flapping, mater?"

Gertrude's mouth went up at one corner and she told Pam to hush.

Pam however never hushes; she merely spoke louder. "It's like the six little wives in the Geisha," she went on, "they sit round the pater, *close* round him—like this——"

I thrust her off my knee. It was far too hot for that sort of nonsense, and Pam seems to forget she weighs a good solid eight stone.

——"Like that, and pater says: 'Are you ready! All together! One——two——three——*flap!*" And the one that does it hardest gets her salary raised! No wonder all the girls are rushing into offices and calling it 'doing their bit'!"

I went on as if I did not hear. "Different in their ages, different in their appearances, but alike in this: they all prefer talking to working."

"Well, but they've got such an old duck to talk to," said my daughter, "I don't blame them, do you, mums?"

Gertrude smiled and said she did not blame them.

"Brown may be called up any day," I continued, "then the whole onus of affairs will be on my shoulders——"

"And you will have to start work at your age. Oh pater, how frightful. What will we do when the whole onus rests on his shoulders, mums?"

It was Rupert who answered—in his rumbling voice. "Probably economise and call it war economy."

I ordered him off the lawn, and he sat on the gate and whistled some silly tune. The way they bring up boys at Public-schools now-a-days is enough to make you sick. You pay and pay, and what do you get for it? You get a boy like Rupert with a voice like a saw, no manners, no education—nothing but a colossal impudence. All these Ruperts have mothers who back them up, make them worse if that is possible, and take their part against their own lawful father every time. Really being a parent these days——

"Billy dear, do get your hat——"

"I object to being called Billy——"

"Yes dearest, but not always," said Gertrude in her syrupy voice, "and not by your own wife." She laid her plump white hand on my arm, and smiled up at me, and said: "Shall I tie a nice big cabbage-leaf round your head like Pam's?"

"He'd look like——" began my daughter.

I turned to Gertrude, "Is this the way you bring up my children to respect me?" I demanded.

"No, I mean I don't dear," said my wife rather confusedly, "Pam, go and fetch your father's hat."

Pam ran and fetched it, and clapped it on my head, and said: "Was it ratty then?" She crumpled my collar, rumpled my hair, but of course

she got round me in the end. Good nature is one of my weak points. Gertrude looked on, laughing, appearing rather handsome and absurdly young for her age. I am sure nobody would realise she is eighteen months older than I am. Indeed she is often two years my senior, and was so now, for she was fifty-one to my forty-nine. It's rather a lot.

It seems rather funny when I think of it—though funny is hardly the word—that I should have started in life with a prejudice against the name of Gertrude, and then one day have found myself married to one. Before that I had spent ten years up to thirty trying to marry a lady of the name of Rosaleen, but somehow—it is one of the things that always puzzles me not succeeding. I have never forgotten her, and never shall. She has remained my one ideal, and my only love. Of course Gertrude has no suspicion. It's one of the things I keep to myself. In a prosiac way I am not unhappy, but with Rosaleen everything would have been wonderful instead of just everyday. You can't have any glamour about a woman called Gertrude. And then her hair—Rosaleen's, I mean. Not that Gertrude's does not present a very effective appearance in the daytime; it does, but is that quite everything? I hardly think so. Outsiders see the results, not the preliminaries. I am less fortunate. . . .

I do not often allow Gertrude to quarrel with

me, for to my mind if matrimony is not harmonious, it's a failure, but she forced a quarrel upon me once over this particular thing.

Rather a nice-looking girl was calling, she had curly auburn hair, and someone said how lucky she was, and she replied:

"Rather! It must be simply *frightful* to retire with curlers!"

I could only agree with her; and rather feelingly, I said it *was*. I know with Rosaleen it would have been different. It wasn't so much that the effect was different, but when one has loved—and especially when one has lost—one knows. Anyway I sighed and fell silent, and then I caught Gertrude's eye. Rather an unaccustomed eye for Gertrude I must own.

When the girl had gone, my wife said it was not at all nice of me to have implied what I *did* imply, and to a young girl too, and she only hoped to goodness she hadn't understood! I knew she had understood from the way she had sympathised, but I told Gertrude she hadn't. To be the perfect husband it is first of all necessary to be the perfect liar. With Rosaleen I could have told the truth all the time, which I should infinitely prefer. It is much less strain and does not require the same memory. Rosaleen also would have told the truth all the time. Now and then I have detected Gertrude in a fib.

All women, with the one exception, do it, it seems. They have not the same sense of honour as men.

Yes, women certainly are kittle cattle.

How contradictory they are! How many in one —and all different. I have come to the conclusion that the longer you live with a woman, the less you know of her. In fact I cannot but think that the most respectable husband arrives at the stage when he feels more like a Mormon than a Christian. Even Gertrude, commonplace to a degree, has made me feel like the owner of a harem. The way she will turn round, contradict herself, eat her own words; the processes she will go through to get her own way! If that is so with Gertrude what would it not mean if one had married the mysterious, the fascinating, the elusive? Perhaps Turks don't have such a bad time after all; variety is the spice of life, and there's not much spice in the ordinary marriage.

There is a strain of obstinacy about Gertrude, a common failing of her sex, I fear—I only met one woman devoid of it. The result is I have to exercise a great deal of tact. Oh to live with someone, —as I so nearly did—who does not call for tact but only for devotion! I have a great fund of love and devotion, but alas! my cheques have never been honoured! The One would not accept it, and so it has to be bottled up in the secret chamber of my heart.

I am not a tyrannical man, but I am firm. One has to be. I do not often put my foot down, yet when I do it stays down. In a word, I am master in my own house. I give orders; I select the wines; I pay the bills. Gertrude decided to send Pam to a smart school of Continental immorals and many matrimonial triumphs. I said; "No, not my daughter," and she was not sent till a whole term later. When I informed my son and heir that if I found him catapulting the conservatory again, I would thrash him within an inch of his life (he wasn't such a powerful young scoundrel in those days) I never did find him. When I forbade my wife to show herself in public in the tightest of the tight skirts, or the shortest and widest of the wide, she only showed herself in public in private, and I would never have known of it save for a chance remark of a man I knew. I do not say this is the ideal success, but I do say it is as far as most men get; perhaps even a little further.

Then to do them justice, both Pam and Rupert hang on my lightest word, even if they are a little apt to contradict it afterwards.

I have seen Rupert literally through measles, catapults, and various careers. For long he wavered between the joys of a parson's life or a pugilist's. The parson had a jolly rectory and a farm (ours does) and had nothing to do save receive tithes and preach a few sermons, which Rupert—unlike Ger-

trude's friend—was ready enough to shorten. On the other hand the pugilist got gory glory and lived in pubs, the idol of the populace. The boy was torn in two for years. Now he has put away childish things. Need I add, the times being what they are, he has decided to be a Field-Marshal? There is a man who is coaching him with a view to his taking the first steps; he will be a very clever fellow if he gets Rupert anywhere on the road to his ambition.

Pam had thought it an excellent profession. "He will always be bringing aide-de-camps home to tea," she said, "and the staffiest of the staff with red all over 'em."

"Yes, pater," said Rupert, "that's the game. I find the brains and you find the dibs. A fair division, and might be more awkward t'other way."

When I asked him what he meant, he said he was only pointing out that he hadn't the dibs.

Pam and Rupert went off, and Gertrude and I sat on the lawn as we always do on fine Sunday afternoons, and talked about manure and the difficulty of getting it.

It's rather tragic when you come to think of it, that a man should dream of bliss and love on the hill-tops with his incomparable Rosaleen, and come down to sitting on a lawn with his wife and talking about manure, but life plays us strange tricks; it takes, not only all the gilt off our gingerbread, but the ginger out of it too.

Instead of going on everlastingly about the manure we never could get—as Gertrude always does on Sundays—she began to talk of Pam.

Now Pam is pale with wide shining eyes, and dark brown hair; like an elf she is, and quite different from any other man's daughter. People call her quaint. To me she is wonderful; a dream come true. Even Rosaleen could not have had a more beautiful daughter, and it puzzles me to think how Pam could have happened to Gertrude. Then she is full of exquisite refinement, of dignity, of grace. Gertrude says she takes after her side of the family. That may be true, but I have never seen any of the family that my Pam takes after. My own idea is that she is sufficiently original to take after herself and could not have made a wiser choice.

Rupert, who has an upturned nose and impudent eyes and mouth, is said by his mother to take after *my* side of the house. I do not see it. I know no member of my family the least like Rupert, and they are equally insistent on the matter.

Absurd as it may seem, Gertrude has almost quarrelled over this trifle of who takes after who. People who have been married some time and have one extremely beautiful and one extremely unbeautiful offspring will understand what I mean. The others will only think they do.

Rupert himself of course makes the matter one of ribaldry, "Take after you!" he exclaimed to me

one day, "Well, I'll push in the face of the next fellow that hints it!"

"Isn't it odd?" My wife's voice came to me from a distance, and penetrated my thoughts, making me start, "To think of Pam being grown up!"

"Grown-up!" I echoed, "Impossible!" The very suggestion was a shock to me. Why I had been carrying her about only the other day! "Rubbish!" I added.

"Eighteen," went on my wife in her persistent way. Women can never let well alone. "Isn't it ridiculous to think of me with a daughter of that age? I'm sure nobody would believe it."

Why ridiculous to think of Gertrude with a grown-up daughter and not me? I who was so much younger but whom everybody tried to make out an old fogy just because I was not one of your lamp-post sort of fellows, and didn't want to be either.

"You were thirty-three when she was born," I reminded her, "and if you had married ten years before you'd have had a daughter of——"

Gertrude went red, "What bosh!" she said, "Offensive bosh!"

I had to say I didn't mean anything of that sort, that everybody would say she didn't look it, and the cloud passed. Still with Rosaleen there would have been no cloud to begin with.

"A woman with a grown-up daughter is in con-

stant danger of becoming a grandmother," she went on. "It's a dreadful thought!"

To me it was more than dreadful. I told Gertrude pretty firmly she might be a grandmother and hanged to it, but that I had no intention whatsoever of being a grandfather! The idea! Why I was quite a young thing myself!

"She's so attractive she is sure to marry early," went on my wife.

It was bad enough to be told that Pam was a little girl no longer but a grown-up young woman, without this. I said I did not intend Pam to marry —at least not for some years to come.

"How are you going to prevent that, my dear?" When she is trying to pick a quarrel with me Gertrude always starts 'my darling.' I refused to be drawn. "By keeping my eyes open," I said.

Those infernal church bells started jangling, and Gertrude got up and looked at her watch. She never could keep away from the Vicar for any length of time.

"I should think after nearly three quarters of an hour's sermon this morning you would have had enough," I observed.

"It would be so much nicer to stay here," she sighed, "but the poor man would be so hurt. He gets so few people these fine evenings."

"Oh go, by all means," I said, "I'm sure I don't want anybody's unwilling company."

"It isn't that, Billy dear," she began, looking distressed, "but he does *try* so hard, and he's such a good earnest man——"

"Quite so," I agreed taking up my paper, "he's your Vicar; I am only your husband. Further explanations are superfluous."

"You are so prejudiced——"

I walked away lest I should be tempted to say something harsh. There are virtues I could not lay claim to. I could not say for instance that I had maintained rigid sobriety all my life, for in my youth I had twice been exceedingly drunk, the first time by accident, the second on purpose. I could not even say, even if I wished to lay claim to such dulness, that I had never kissed any woman save my wife, for I had kissed Rosaleen whenever she would let me, and that had been fairly often. But there were two things I could say: I could honestly declare I was a broad-minded man, and one entirely free from a single prejudice. Prejudice! I did not know the meaning of the word!

Certainly I did not care for the Vicar; neither did the Vicar care for me, but I at least had a good reason for this distaste. Is it not annoying to any man boxed up all day in the City, working like a slave, to think of another on the loose from morning to night, with nothing to do, and half the women in the Parish ready to help him to do it? To sit in a beastly office and think of another sitting

on one's lawn with one's wife, growing confidential over the teacups? Then, as an excellent husband and father myself, I could have little liking or approval for one who never seemed to have tea with his own wife and six noisy little boys.

As for Pam's version of the case,—the little monkey!—that was just her nonsense. True, he had stopped me reading the Lessons after the first Sunday, but that was just his greed. It was not pleasant for me to stand in that conspicuous position, every eye on me, just to oblige him, and find that one lesson was an embarrassing one to read before a mixed congregation when one knew every man and woman of them, and that the other was the one about the commandments which one knows by heart. Pam and Rupert made up the story that I mumbled one Lesson so that nobody could hear, they could only see me getting redder and redder, and that I left out all the 'nots' in the other, earnestly inciting the congregation to steal, etc., with the result that there was a bad outbreak of various kinds. Needless to say, that is also nonsense, and that far from resenting having this office taken away from me, I was thankful to be rid of it. The others said they were thankful I was rid of it too, so that was plain enough surely.

"You don't like his long sermons because they keep you awake," Pam had said, and that was equally absurd. It was annoying to have a man in

the pulpit who thumped at intervals, but that was all.

No, I had merely the objection every man has to a priest-ridden household. Certainly Gertrude had too much tact to let me be constantly finding him there, but if I happened to pop home early as likely as not I might chance upon him.

The thing I really had against him was this: he had spoiled Pilling's life. Pilling was what is called a golf-maniac. He adored the game; lived for it. When the war first broke out he could go on playing, but for a long time it had become impossible, and Mrs. Pilling saw more of him than she had ever done in her life, and used to wonder when on earth the war would be over. You see though he's over military age and has a family to keep, he looks absurdly young. When he set off with golf-clubs he got hooted in the streets. He said he was for ever being taken for a slacker or a young man who hadn't been combed out, and that people used to ask if he was sheltering under the Government umbrella till he thought he should go mad. He hit on several ways of disguising his clubs, but then the links gave him a bad time. Everybody was in Khaki or looked elderly, and he could never get anyone to play with. In fact, so I am given to understand, he actually got warned off the course.

One day it occurred to him to disguise himself. He turned up a most excellent imitation of a mid-

dle-aged parson, and he and I went off for a game on these links. Pilling is a 3-handicap man, and it is not often I can get him to play with. The Vicar was waiting on the first tee, and at sight of another parson he was like a charger scenting the battle. He made for us at once, and wanted to know where poor Pilling's church was, and was he High or Low. The Vicar plays a silly potty game of golf and had no partner that day. He collected a number of the parish and they all came round with us. Shake them off we couldn't. Pilling was evasive about the church, and just said he was Low, and that choked off the Vicar for a bit.

All went well till by the most awful luck Pilling got badly bunkered. He had his back to the crowd for the moment, and he let himself go. When I saw ladies flying in all directions with their fingers in their ears I realised we were up against it, and that Pilling had forgotten he was a parson.

The Vicar came up. Not being a good or keen golfer he was unsympathetic, and he just walked into Pilling, and unfortunately Pilling walked back. Well, to make a long story short, the Vicar who is on the Board of the Club, warned Pilling off. He said that for the credit of the cloth he must never appear again. Of course the poor fellow couldn't, and as he said with simple pathos to me, his life was over. Yet his disguise had seemed excellent.

It is very difficult however to get a disguise that

goes right through; the inner Adam pops out at the most inconvenient moment. To play Othello really artistically one must be blacked all over, and Pilling, poor fellow, had only blacked his hands and face as it were.

I was thinking these sort of thoughts when I heard a Noise. I cannot describe it; it was indescribable. I can only give it a capital letter.

Then Pamela came running, her eyes shining more than ever, "Dad, just fancy!" she cried clutching my arm, "Isn't it lovely? There's a young man in an aeroplane upside down in the pear-tree. He's saying. . . . things!"

That dreaded danger—a young man! And in my precious pear-tree! I flew to the spot. Pam followed.

"Do you know this is private property and that you are trespassing?" I shouted to the suspended object up above. He might come crashing down any moment to the further disaster of the tree. Naturally I felt annoyed.

"Curse it," said the young man, "fetch me a ladder, can't you, and be quick about it! Can't you *see?*" He added something about 'old fool,' 'silly old somethinged fool' to be exact. Presumably he had also had the Public-School education of to-day. It was exactly what Rupert would have said under the same circumstances. His insolence was incredible, but I must do him the justice to admit he had

not seen Pam. Indeed in his peculiar position I doubt whether he saw anything but the sky and the pear-tree, though of course he could hear me plainly enough.

I turned to my daughter, "Pam," I said, "go away at once. You are grown-up now your mother says. Such language is not suited to your ears——"

"Oh I like it——I mean I don't call that anything," she said, "You know I can hear you in your bath in the morning when the water is cold. Oh Dad, isn't it exciting? Doesn't he look a perfect darling upside down like that."

"Hush!" I commanded. I was afraid the wretched fellow would hear and find encouragement where none was meant.

"I do think it sweet of him to choose our pear-tree," she went on, "and I do hope he will stop to supper."

"He won't be asked," I retorted. This is the way my wife brings up my daughter: this is the way she carried out a sacred charge. How different if Rosaleen had done the bringing up! "Now run away dear, and do as you're told at once."

"Oh Dad, you *are* funny when you talk in that imploring voice," she returned. "Don't his legs look a nice shape? I hate 'em scraggy—or bulgy."

I have no idea what she means by bulgy legs. Rupert's are scraggy enough goodness knows.

"You somethinged old ass, haven't you a some-

thinged ladder?" demanded the voice, "How much longer do you think I can hang on like this to the somethinged tree?"

Pam ran quickly away and I breathed more freely.

"Blank you," I said, trying to keep my temper, "that's my pear-tree."

We had counted on a good crop of pears this year for the first time. If there was bitterness in my voice, I had my excuse. I had not only boasted of that pear-tree, I had done worse—— I had betted on it. Now the pears that would never be kept falling on my head like rain. It was like a continual snow-storm, and the blossom had been setting perfectly. I should have won easily. I had accepted any bet that came along—had it not been for this profane young devil.

"The wriggling makes it worse," I called up. Every wriggle meant another shower.

"I can't stay here all day." The young fool sounded quite hysterical.

"Nobody asked you to stay at all," I retorted. I am not bad at repartee.

"I want a ladder."

"Here it is," panted Pam staggering under it. She propped it against the tree.

"Just in time!" gasped the young man literally falling on to it. "Good egg!" he exclaimed gratefully looking down at Pam now that he was right

way up. Just what Rupert would have said! Obviously the young man had had every social and educational advantage, and would be the more dangerous.

"Mind the second rung," warned my daughter, "it's rocky."

"Pam," I said gravely, "it is usual to be introduced before——"

"Not in aeroplanes in pear-trees in wartime," returned Pam. "Oh doesn't he look a perfect pet? What a good thing there's that pigeon pie——"

The 'perfect pet' came down. He ignored me, but he grabbed Pam's hand and shook it vigorously up and down.

"You're top-hole," he said, "ab-so-lutely top-hole. But for you I would be in pieces by now with this old perisher looking on—— sorry if he's any relation," he added quickly.

"Merely a father," I said.

"Well I'm sorry," he said ambiguously, not looking at me at all. "You're a proper sport," he went on to Pam, "and if there's one thing I do like a girl to be, it's a sport."

Pam beamed, and I moved forward to show this very dangerous young man the nearest way out, but my daughter had already got hold of him by the coat-sleeve, or what was left of it, and was leading him into the house.

"I'll show you the bathroom," she said, "you *are*

in a state, aren't you? The water's always hot at this time, and whilst you're turning it on I'll find you some of Dad's clothes. They'll be too wide and short, but you can manage. We have supper at eight: cold, you know, but there's pigeon-pie and things. . . ."

I was left gasping.

CHAPTER III

HOW WIVES ENCOURAGE UNDESIRABLES

AT supper, Rupert, who, I could see had already discarded the profession of Field-Marshal for that of flying man, wondered about the aeroplane. Oughtn't it to be got down or something? Wouldn't it be ruined in case of heavy rain?

The young man whose name was Cecil Burn, and whose mouth was full of pigeon-pie, said it was all right where it was: it belonged to the War Office. Suddenly he laid down his knife and fork, and looked across at me, "You didn't notice anything else in the tree did you? Hear any other noise?

"Why?"

"Nothing like any other feller?"

"Was there another of you?" asked Rupert.

"There *was,*" said Mr. Burn thoughtfully, "but I daresay he dropped out——the silly ass!——before I struck that infernal tree. Vegetation ought to be removed, only the War Office never see to anythin'. 'Spose we must go an' look for the blighter, can't leave him hung up all night like that——

what! Good thing your stuff is all cold." He rose.

The rest of us followed suit.

"No, we can't leave him there I 'spose," said Mr. Burn again, but very much as if he would prefer to wait and get on with his supper.

"You certainly can't," said I.

"He may be chawed up in the machinery, the careless fool. Wish I'd remembered him before."

I said that doubtless the victim wished it also—— if he were still alive.

"Oh he's accustomed to it," said Burn in his off-hand way, "he's the pilot, you know."

By this time we had reached the tree, and Burn gave an ear-piercing hail.

It was faintly answered from above.

"I told you so," said the aviator turning to me, "I suppose I shall have to go up that infernal ladder and fetch him down. Just like him to go unconscious at the wrong time. What would have happened if I hadn't remembered him? He might have been there for days. The War Office would have taken at least a week to get it through the various departments till they reached the one that's responsible for gettin' fellers down."

He ascended the tree——and the rest of the fruit descended at the same time. He brought down the pilot adroitly enough, but the poor young man looked very far "gone" to me. He said, however, that he did not think that more than three bones

were broken this time, and it was what he was used to. I wanted to take him inside and ring up the doctor, but he said he preferred to go straight to his usual hospital, and we got him off. They knew him there, he said, and kept his own bed aired, and rather a dinky little nurse to look after him. It had taken him six weeks the last time, and eight the time before, but he gave it three this time.

"So long," he said to Burn, and Burn replied "So long," and returned to his supper.

"Funny me forgettin' all about the silly fool," he observed to me.

I said that no doubt the pilot had seen, and much appreciated, the humour of this forgetfulness.

"He's rather a fathead," went on Burn, "that makes the seventh all told. Some of these days he'll land on his head, and they won't be able to mend that so easily at his hospital. Flyin's all right, but you must keep your end up. When I realised the engine had gone cold on us I made for your roof, and if that tree had not been in the way, I should have perched on it like a bird. If the War Office knew their job, they'd have every inhabitant of a house compelled to have flat landing places on top. But do they? Not on your life they don't!"

"Possibly they are old-fashioned enough to respect the rights of property," I suggested.

"You've hit it! Old-fashioned! Old-fashioned ain't the name for it: they're obsolete, that's what

they are, only they haven't the brains to see it for themselves."

"But you who are so obviously highly-gifted in that direction, owe a solemn duty to your country to write and tell them so——"

"Billy dear," said my wife, "I think Mr. Burn is ready for another glass of beer, and talking about beer, did you notice what they said in to-day's paper about it?"

"I did not," I said. Women will burst into any conversation with something irrelevant and trifling for the sheer love of talking. My wife is no exception. You may spend half a life-time trying to cure them, exercise the patience of Job, and at the end you find yourself exactly where you were at the beginning, indeed you are lucky if you are not further back.

Everybody talked flying but me. I declined to talk at all. A man has small chance of being heard in his own household these 'progressive' times.

Mr. Burn was full of deeds of dering-do, but also full of military reticence and discipline, for when Pam asked him how many Zeppelins he had brought down, he closed up at once, and said they were not allowed to impart secret information that might be used by the enemy.

Pam said: "But wouldn't the enemy know how many Zeppelins did not return?"

Mr. Burn said darkly one never knew the enemy's little games.

Then Rupert demanded was he commander or squadron-commander, and he closed up about that too. One's rank was also of use to the enemy if disclosed, it seems, so he did not disclose it. It was Gertrude who elicited that this was his first 'real flight.' He was anything from twenty to twenty-four, but had the assurance of a man of the world. Flying was the game, the only game. The army and navy were doing their best in their obsolete old way, but flying was IT. The other fellers were back numbers. Men who had never flown, who had served neither in the army or in the navy were cumberers of the earth and ought not to be allowed. 'Perishers' he called them. I suppose I, who supplied my family with a luxurious home and money to burn, was a 'Perisher' in this young man's eyes. I should think being whirled about in a flying machine, ruining other people's pear-trees and making open love to their beautiful daughters, must be rather pleasant than otherwise, and far less strenuous than slaving from morn to night at an office, and endeavouring to persuade a staff of flappers not to flap. But who thinks of that? No, such things are just taken for granted. If you can't be picturesque in some way, or have a uniform, you are right out of the picture, and the sooner you are

properly out of the way and under the sod the better.

Rupert's voice can be heard a mile off, high or low, and his:

"I say what did you put *your* old governor into? We want to shove ours into somethin'. You know what they are?"

Young Burn replied that he knew what they were, too jolly well if you were to ask him, and for his part he would advise——

Eavesdroppers are certainly always punished, if only by losing the thread of the conversation at the most interesting point. I do not know what my family decided to do with me; I only know I decided not to do it.

Any 'suggestion' coming from them will be snubbed; any 'uniform' offered for my inspection will be burned. Anything I do, such as continuing secretly to assist the wives of some of the called-up, will be done in private. Gertrude has no sense of proportion; now Rosaleen——

"Is it Burn with an 'e'?" she demanded the moment we were alone.

I said I did not know or care and I failed to see what difference it made. If a man were objectionable without an 'e' he was not the less objectionable with it.

Gertrude said it might make a lot of difference. She had been reading an account of the Duke of

Zipp's son and heir. He had gone into something and was Burne with an 'e'—the Marquis of Burne. In this world there was a difference between a future tallow-chandler or a future duke whatever there might be in the next.

I replied that judging from his manners and conversation he was a future tallow-chandler.

"That's just why he may easily turn out to be the duke," she said with a woman's want of logic. "It will be disappointing if he should turn out to be the wrong Burn."

I said he had already done that to my thinking.

She said she would find out next time.

I pointed out that a 'next time' was neither a likely nor desirable event. There is a way of speeding the parting guest that even the modern lord of the earth cannot fail to understand.

She put her hand through my arm and walked me up and down. "Billy, darling, I thought it only kind to ask him to drop in any time——"

"Did you ask him to drop on the other trees?" I demanded, withdrawing my arm.

"And of course he'll have to come about getting the aeroplane down——"

"I am sorry my daughter is so disagreeable to you that you must take such urgent steps to get rid of her——"

"Oh no, dear, but if he should turn out to be the right Burn——"

"He can never turn out to be the right Burn," said I in a tone that closed the discussion.

A few days later he came again, candidly avowing himself Burn without an 'e'. He was a doctor's son and had entered that profession, but flying was the game.

He arrived limping and bleeding, and once more in the need of a hot bath and clean clothes—my clothes. It appears he had run up on a motor-bike, ridden it for the first time, and as far as that particular one was concerned, for the last. They all fussed over him of course—trust women for that! —and asked him if he were hurt, and where? I think they wanted to practise their ambulance classes on him; neither had been allowed a real patient as yet, but he said very hurriedly he was only scratched, "thanks awf'lly." Fortunately, so he said, he was not really hurt at all, but the poor old bike had got it in the neck. However that was fortunate too, so it turned out, as most providentially it belonged to the War Office.

No wonder the taxes keep going up, and our young men in this country are having the time of their lives!

I said I hoped the War Office had something else to put at his disposal, and he said he jolly well hoped so too, and if they hadn't they'd hear about it. Everybody knew what a silly old show it was.

The trouble he had had to get that old mo'bike out of them I wouldn't believe.

I replied, that on the contrary, I could easily believe it.

"Well there you are!" he said dismissing the War Office with a contemptuous wave of a filthy hand, "Guess I'd better hop it into your bath. *Awf'lly* decent of you to offer me your togs again."

As a matter of fact I had rather pointedly not offered them.

"'Course they're a bit wide and short—what! But we can't have everythin', an' there's nothin' wrong with your bath-water. So long!"

I agreed that one could not have everything, and went on with my paper. I added that it gave me great gratification to know that my bath-water found favour in his sight.

He said:

"Oh that's all right!" and went.

Pam went too, to fetch my clothes I suppose. It was a nice thing to have one's daughter practically superintending the bath of a strange young man, but those are modern manners, it seems. How shocked Rosaleen,—so modest, so shrinking, so shy, —would have been!

Of course when I complained to Gertrude she contradicted me. That's the modern wife all over. Why they go through the farce of promising to love, honour, and obey, I can't imagine. They take care

it remains a farce. She argued at great length about it. She said that the Early Victorian maiden had ceased to exist, and a good thing too.

I said there was moderation in all things. Personally I failed to find it a good thing that modesty had become a mere peculiarity in the modern woman.

Gertrude would have her say. She insisted that the old-fashioned up-bringing of girls was ridiculous and pernicious too.

"Under their artificial show of 'modesty,' they were most immodest," she went on, "why they could not meet a young man without thinking of love and matrimony. What the young men thought of goodness knows——"

"We know what they think of to-day," I said sternly, "motor-bicycles——"

"Quite a healthy thing to think of too. Now-a-days the young people meet on the same ground, sex is not always being waved before their eyes; they can be friends, chums, just a lot of high-spirited young things together. Pam is just——"

"She is probably attending the ablutions of her new chum——"

"Billy dear, now you are beginning to breathe in that short excited way that is so bad for you——"

"I am not excited or breathing or anything," I

replied, trying to keep my temper with my wife's inconsequence.

"I will fetch Pam down; and Billy——"

"Do not call me Billy. You know I hate it——"

"Yes, dearest, but you know you liked me to call you Billy when we were engaged."

This was very far from being the case. Only Rosaleen had had the right to call me Billy. She could make it sound delightful and uncommon. Gertrude made it sound ordinary and rather undignified for a man of my age and position. I had not liked her calling me Billy in those days. I had not even liked her being engaged to me, but they were not things I could mention. When Rosaleen said she was going to marry somebody else and that it was no good to make a fuss, I must bear it like a man, I told her I had no intention of making a fuss —it was Fate—and every intention of bearing it like a man, and that I was going to get married myself. Then I proposed to Gertrude in a temper; she accepted me, and we were married. Gertrude of course knows nothing of all this—Heaven forbid she ever should!

"One can't begin objecting to things before one's married," I said at length.

"But one can make up for it afterwards, can't one?" asked Gertrude, with a little sigh. "Oh, Bi—William I mean, how different life would be if one went on being engaged and never got married!"

I did not think everybody would go on being engaged, but that was another thing I could not say. I may have my faults, but from the day I married her, I have tried to spare Gertrude's feelings in every way. In her limited fashion she has been a good wife to me, doing her duty when she thinks of it. If there have been times when she has done her duty in the most aggravating way possible, and others when she seemed to have no time to think, well, that is the way of women all the world over. It is something to know I have made one woman happy and done the best for her in all matters. Not all men can say as much. The majority put themselves first and their wives nowhere. At least, the faults of the average man do not rest on my shoulders.

I have failed myself, and I have failed my ideals, but I have never failed Gertrude. My heart may often feel more broken than not, but my wife believes me happy and content, and I make every effort that she shall continue to do so. She believes me all hers; she never guesses that living or dead, I belong to the love of my youth.

Oh Rosaleen, my dark, dear Rosaleen! Shall I ever forget our tragic parting under the watery moon? Never! How we clung together; how we cried—both of us! How magnificent it made one feel! How often we swore never to forget. I have kept my vow; dare I doubt hers? No, no, some-

where my Rosaleen is true to me, as I to her. Sometimes when she looks at the man she has married—a man called Smith of all things!—she thinks:

"How differently Billy would have acted!"

It is all over nineteen years ago and yet perennially fresh. Our paths diverged abruptly. She went to her middle-aged husband and a house in Park Lane, I to Gertrude and the earning of a pittance. Fate had been cruel indeed. A little later she had made me rich and Rosaleen poor—too late, of course! My poor love had hardly got accustomed to the bare decencies of life when they were all rent from her, and she and her husband went to the colonies and were swallowed up. That was my dumb little agony of which Gertrude knew nothing. I might appear careless, even happy; I might smile and bite on the bullet, but the heart knoweth its own bitterness, and only I knew the truth. I was one overshadowed by a great tragedy.

"What do you say?" I asked.

"I said how different if one remained engaged all the time."

I thought of Pam and frowned. I could not do without Pam whatever Gertrude might be prepared to do.

"What about the children?" I said at last.

"Of course they *are* everything, aren't they?" said my wife in the odd tone she sometimes uses

to me. I could see she was in one of her moods. Women have so many, but they are all alike in this: that they are utterably unreasonable.

"I feel sure Pam will be sitting on the box outside the bathroom door shouting at Burn while he has his bath," I said. "Women should not be so—so unrestrained with the other sex."

"Every man is a harem-man where his own wife and daughters are concerned," said Gertrude, "and 'let 'em lead their own lives' where the wives and daughters of other men are concerned. Young Burn is just a friendly boy, someone to play with. He dropped——"

"Out of my pear-tree," I reminded her a little bitterly.

"Bother—Billy, dear, I'm so tired of that old pear-tree——"

"It would have fruited. I should have won easily. I had make quite a big book on it; now I shall have to pay up, thanks to your friends and the encouragement you give them."

"Dearest, the other pear-trees will have heaps of fruit——"

"I did not bet on the others," I reminded her.

"There's young Burn now. He seems about to play tennis."

"In my flannel trousers——"

"Your others are ready. Why not change and have a game? Of course it's early, but we shan't

get another April like this in a hurry. Why not make a four? They would love it, only I am afraid that terrific serve of yours will frighten that poor boy."

I rather fancy it did. I can still play tennis fairly well. Pam and I won. Gertrude is too old to play now, and besides, she makes a fifth. It was not so much that she was bad at it—she had some quite good strokes—but I consider it very undignified for the mistress of a grown-up household to get so red and hot over a game.

"Well played, pater!" cried Pam, "We wiped the floor with them, didn't we?"

"Take you on again?" offered young Burn.

Again we wiped the floor with them.

Tea appeared just as we finished. Gertrude is an excellent manager, so often these commonplace women are. They may not be able to accompany one to the heights, but they do see to one's comfort here below. She had my chair and my tea and my hot scones ready. She had been very excited over the sett.

"It was too bad of you, Billy, to play such a fierce game," she said reprovingly, "you know young men can never stand up to you for long, and your serve gets more and more untakable. Now you must rest on your laurels. The boys can have a single while we three sit and watch them."

"We gave 'em socks, dad, didn't we?" asked Pam.

And really, you know, we did. Young Burn's manner to me changed very much for the better after that. I suppose he realised that I wasn't such a back number after all.

It was very restful in the shade——

Gertrude had on a dainty new dress that suited her and made her look very young for her age. She has quite a pleasing manner when she likes. After all, the past is the past, and it's a man's duty to keep it so.

Young Burn went away, and Pam and Rupert ran off somewhere. I was feeling very much refreshed, and was annoyed when Gertrude got up and said with a sigh:

"Well I suppose they'll be expecting me."

"Who?" I asked sharply. If I was content to sit in the shade with Gertrude, surely Gertrude should have been well-content to sit in the shade with me, but no, women are never satisfied unless they are rushing off somewhere.

"The Vicar and——" she began.

I sat up very straight and said: well, perhaps that does not matter; anyway I said she was not to go. Let the Vicar seek the company of his own wife for a change. Soon the wretched woman would not know him to speak to.

"I forbid you to go," I said.

She said she must go just the same; she had promised. "It's this wretched prevention scheme," she began, "and Miss de Vere Jones——"

I said what I thought of meddling spinsters.

"Yes dear, that's just it. The Vicar thinks I may be able to manage her, and get her to drop it."

I knew Miss de Vere Jones as a lady who spent her life in preventing this and that and making a most infernal and interfering nuisance of herself. "What's the woman trying to prevent now?" I asked.

"The soldiers——"

"Oh, trying to prevent the soldiers, is she? Who's going to prevent the Germans then?"

"Dear, I was going to finish: prevent the soldiers being out after dusk."

"Indeed. And when the Germans arrive will she allow them out after dusk?"

"Billy, dear! She says they call after the girls, call them Maudie, and that they ask every man with a woman 'Who's your lady friend?' and that it isn't nice; that it's got to be prevented."

"Do they call 'Maudie' after her, or accuse her of being a lady friend?" I demanded.

"No," said Gertrude, and added as if struck by a sudden idea, "Perhaps that's why."

Certainly the soldiers did all these things and more. Even a middle-aged man accompanied by a more than middle-aged wife was informed:

"I *am* surprised at you! Who's your lady-friend? It's not the one I saw you with at 'Ampstead." And all our servants' names were seemingly Maudie.

I treated the incident with the dignity it merited, but Gertrude had a way of getting pink and giggling which I thought very bad for discipline. Like many places we are practically an encampment; we hear the rhythm of the marching feet daily, the songs, the bugles. It is strange to think that this is England and bugles are blowing throughout the breadth of the land.

Gertrude says she loves the bugles; they make her think. I told her, that in that case, I could not but appreciate them too.

"Is Miss de Vere Jones one of the people who do not yet realise we are at war?" I asked Gertrude. "Could you not ask her to Prevent something more to the point."

"I am going to try and persuade her not to Prevent at all," said Gertrude rather desperately, "the Vicar says——"

"When I want to hear what the Vicar says I can go to church," I returned.

"You don't listen there either," sighed Gertrude. "Oh why are you so prejudiced against him!"

I got up. "I am never prejudiced against anything or anybody," I said coldly "and I will ask you to remember it."

"There's the Vicar now," said Gertrude, "I must run."

She ran.

They went down the road together; whether they were really going to see Miss de Vere Jones or not I neither know nor care. All I do know is, that as I marched up the drive, I heard the well-known refrain:

"Who's your lady friend? Oh I *am* surprised at you!"

I was more than surprised myself; I was disgusted.

CHAPTER IV

HOW WIVES SYMPATHISE WITH THE INJURER RATHER THAN WITH THE INJURED

A VERY painful thing has happened to me. Togo has bitten the Vicar. I cannot tell you what distress it has caused me. It is easily the most unpleasant thing that has happened. I have been worried from morning to night about it, and nobody, not even Gertrude, really sympathises with me.

I could not help accusing her with some bitterness of sympathising with the Vicar. She was very defiant about it; then she said she did. She even went so far as to try and force a quarrel on me.

"Why didn't you call him?" she demanded.

"To whom do you allude? The Vicar?"

"You know I mean Togo. You could have called him off at least."

"He never listens," I replied, and got away from Gertrude, only to fall into the hands of Pam. There were people passing down the road, interested people, for the thing had made a lot of talk, but Pam did not trouble to moderate her voice. She said:

"Oh Dad, I do not think you should have *let* Togo bite the poor dear Vicar even if you were snorty about the Lessons, and do hate his long sermons. It won't be any real help. Clergymen have to stand up anyhow, so he may make them longer if anything."

"Hush!" I said horrified. People are so apt to misunderstand, and they were walking very slowly past our gates. I could see the tense look about their ears. It's such a gossipy place.

"Well Old Thing, you never called him off."

"Only because I knew he would not come——"

"He might have come for once," said Pam, "One never knows, and at least you might have given him the *choice,* Dad." I must admit that where Togo is concerned one never does know. Only he had got a grip that did not seem like coming unfastened, and it seemed more tactful for me to be somewhere else.

The Vicar and I have been on rather strained terms lately owing to one thing and another. He had seen me yawning in church and opening my watch, and I had not minded that he did see. Clergymen are such egoists. Of course Gertrude had put on her religious look to take his attention, but she would complain as much as I when we got home. She said she much preferred him out of the church; certainly she saw enough of him to know. At present I fancy he will only call at the Elms

when I—and Togo—are out, and for a little while he will hardly be in a condition to call at all.

Of course Gertrude tried to make me write and say that I was sorry for what Togo had done. I said that what Togo had done, he had done entirely on his own initiative, and I refused to be held responsible for my dog's actions. I added that I wasn't sorry; that I was not really there when the thing happened, and preferred to know nothing about it.

"He thinks you set him on——"

"A nice Christian thought!" I said, "I wonder what the Bishop would think of practising versus preaching."

"But Billy it isn't as if——"

"Then let him think it," I said with some pardonable heat, "The unchristian swine!"

"Oh Billy *dear!*"

"Set him on indeed! Have you ever known Togo go for anything I ever set him on?"

"No, but he *might*——"

"When I set him on that tramp for threatening me, the brute licked his face and wagged himself giddy. When I tried to make him make friends with my aunt he got her by the toe. If he set himself on to the Vicar whose fault is that? Anyway I have no direct evidence——"

"His wife showed me his. . . . clothes."

"Then she ought to be ashamed of herself!" I cried.

"Oh Billy, she was quite bitter about it, and I don't wonder. Six to mend for, she said, always tearing them, and now this. She did not know how to find the time——" She paused abruptly.

"Well," I said, "go on. What next?"

"Nothing dearest," she said quickly going very red.

"Gertrude are you or are you not, my wife?"

She said she supposed so.

"Did you or did you not mend them?"

She hung her head, as well she might, "Under the circumstances," she faltered, "Oh Billy what could I do?"

"Preserve a certain reticence and dignity," I said. Then I recollected the point, "Anyway that's no evidence."

"It took me over two hours."

I frowned her down. "If unknown to me he bit the Vicar, well, he bit the Vicar," I said, "and that's all there is to it. I am sick of the subject and must ask you not to refer to it again. Really it's coming to something when a man gets blamed for the doings of his dog which was not properly with him at the time."

Gertrude sighed and went away.

Then came the turn of the village constable; a fussy officious person. He came up to see about

it, and after he had had the second glass, wiped his mouth, and said:

"A dog has got to be under control from sunset to sunrise."

"He did it at four; hours after the sun had risen, and hours before it set," I returned, "At least I am given to believe it was about four."

"But sir, he was with you."

"I was not with him. We may have started on the same road at the same time, but we had every intention of parting at the cross roads. If the Vicar had not come and excited him, inciting him to—to folly, making him disobey his master——"

"Sir, the Reverend says as how you did nothink. Never said a word, never called him off——"

"I was returning home," I said, "how should I know what was happening behind my back——"

"It was happening behind *his* back," said the constable crudely, "the dog attacked most vicious. The Reverend says you must have knowed even if you'd turned round and kept your eyes shut, 'cos of the noise, sir. He said the noise was somethink horrid."

"It was," I said, "but he made it. Surely I can't be blamed for that."

"If you'd turned round——"

"If I turned round for every sound I might as well walk backwards and be done with it——"

"But sir, the law——"

I gave him a sovereign and that disposed of the law.

If the Vicar thought to get the better of me by bringing in the texts "Is thy servant a dog?" and "The dogs ate up the portion" (Not that Togo took the risk: he put it out) he was disappointed. I was not there. But I have had a miserable time of it and no help from anybody. I have been too worried even to have time to miss Rosaleen. Gertrude who swore to comfort, seemed to prefer to comfort anyone save her own husband.

CHAPTER V

HOW WIVES ARE VERY DECEITFUL

SORRY I could not come before," observed young Burn cheerfully to me. I had not asked him to come at all. "Indeed?" I said coldly.

"There's an old fossil down from the W. O. and you know what they are?"

I certainly knew what 'old fossils' were according to my uninvited guest——anyone a year or two over forty.

"But he's got a jolly W. O. car," went on Mr. Burn as one who had discovered that even old fossils have their uses, "I may trot it out a bit for him. The poor old beggar doesn't seem to have much nerve for drivin' what's worth *calling* drivin'."

No wonder expenses were mounting up! An aeroplane, a motor-bicycle and now an expensive motor-car to be replaced. If one young man can dispose of three such expensive toys in a few weeks, how many can be accounted for by say half a million young men in a year? The figures dazzled me and I gave it up.

"You can drive?"

"Oh it's just a matter of nerve," he answered evasively, "Things like that never trouble me."

I said I could well believe it.

He beamed at me. "You see I trained for a doctor. That's all nerve, and good practice for anythin'. I can tell you it takes somethin' to remember all the inside thing-a-me's, and a bit of nerve, when one's hauled 'em out, to get 'em in again——in their right places. But my motto is: go ahead an' don't worry."

"You can doubtless safely leave that to the patient," I suggested, "if he is still in a condition to worry about anything."

"Oh they always do that," he answered lightly, "A worryin' ungrateful set of blighters, I can tell you. Hullo, here's Pam. Cheero!"

"Cherro!" she returned. They went off together.

Even if this young man had been an ordinary visitor, and not a designing young scoundrel trying to steal my little girl away from me, I could never have liked him. As it was I almost hated him. Gertrude tried to persuade me I didn't, and that I misunderstood the young man, who was an excellent creature under his casual exterior. Pam ignored it, and the youth himself never saw it.

The type of person who never sees anything he does not want to see, is only too common. A number of my relations belong to it. I could mention

two who can never be brought to see my merits. When they read this book they'll recognise themselves, and I hope they'll feel properly ashamed, that's all, and make up for it by planking out their tenpences. I very much doubt either.

Talking about young Burn and his motor cars, reminds me that both my gardener and chauffeur were called up, and get substitutes I could not. I did not purpose using the car for pleasure, but there were business necessities and relatives to be looked up and so on, and I did not see how I was to do without somebody to drive it. There were wounded soldiers to be sent out, and how could I, slaving at the office from morn till night, find time to do that too?

The garden was bad enough in all conscience. We had made it as near ideal as a garden may be, and now once perfect order was breaking out into a wilderness. It was distressing to go round it. Gertrude—so like a woman!—would proudly show me a tiny patch.

"Pam and I did that this afternoon?" she would say.

"Did what?" I asked puzzled.

"Can't you see, dear?"

"I see something that looks very bare. What *have* you been doing at it? It does not look very ornamental, does it?"

Then they would declare indignantly that they

had weeded it, or sown it, or dug it—*which* was a detail; certainly *I* could never tell the difference. However as long as they were satisfied that was the great thing. Keep your wife happy if you can, because only that way does some sort of peace lie for yourself.

I said I didn't mind them amusing themselves like that in the least, that I did not think they had done any real harm.

Then they would exclaim this or that, and end by urging me to 'do my bit.' Would Rosaleen have greeted a worn-out husband with such a demand? Well I knew the answer to that. I had my tea to get, a sett of tennis to please the children and keep them up to a good stiff game, and the evening papers to be read—all before dinner. Women do not seem to realise that reading the papers is not a business man's pleasure but his duty.

I was very worried about the car and the garden, and if I was a trifle less good-tempered than usual I do think Gertrude should have understood and have made allowances, any other wife would. But Gertrude has never understood me, that's the fact; the finer, more subtle natures are above the comprehension of the others. Instead of understanding she would say:

"Just an hour; so good for the figure."

"As long as I am satisfied with my figure as it is——" I began.

"Dearest, there was a time when you were not so easily satisfied——"

"Old Thing, try a bit of hustle for a change," Pam broke in.

A very trying time indeed! Almost every day Gertrude would ask me if I had got chauffeur or gardener and I would say I had not, but I hoped. . . .

"I tell you what it is," she said briskly one day, "we must have a chauffeuse and gardeness. Everybody's doing it."

"I must ask you not to bring the music-hall catch phrases into my house," I said sternly to Gertrude, for really to hear a woman of over fifty—whatever she might look—using such slang was too much.

She laughed and said she had not meant *that.* Only that everybody *was* doing it, and we should have to go with the times, and get them too.

"No woman will ever drive my car," I said, "and no female calling herself a lady-gardener, possibly because she is neither, will enter my garden. We will not even discuss it."

I put my foot down once and for all. How could I give orders to ladies even if they weren't? Let out to them when they annoyed! Tell them to dig this and be sharp about it; to mind the corner for Heaven's sake! Impossible! I would not be made ridiculous in my own house, and that was the end

of it; therefore once and for all I disposed of the matter.

A few days later I happened to come home a quarter of an hour earlier than usual. Talk about the virtues of punctuality; punctuality can lead to much beside virtue. Does it ever occur to a business man accustomed to coming home year in and year out at a certain time, that the whole course of his life might be changed if he happened once or twice to turn up when he wasn't expected? Does he realise that till he has done this he cannot really hope to know his own wife and his own household?

I practise what I preach. I came home when I was very obviously not expected. The car was at the door and Gertrude getting out of it. She started when her eyes fell on me, and said rather nervously:

"How early you are, darling!"

"*Too* early it seems," I replied.

Gertrude stood first on one leg then on the other——a ridiculous attitude for a woman of her age.

"Might I be permitted to enquire who has been using it?"

"I should think you could see, dear. You said it was bought for me, that working so hard at the office you had no time for idle pleasure——"

"And who drove it?" I was quite calm——but dangerously calm. If I had returned at my usual

time I should have known nothing of the affair. The car would have been in the garage, and Gertrude would obviously forget to mention that it had ever been out. Women are a mass of deceit. Now Rosaleen would have died rather than do a thing like that.

"I——I drove it," said Gertrude, "at least part of the way." Then she flung her head back in the ridiculously defiant way she has. I imagine she thinks it suits her, makes her look 'regal' or something. As a matter of fact her friend the Vicar calls her regal-looking. "It was great fun. I got on better than Pam."

"Would you mind explaining?"

"I *was* explaining. Pam and I are learning to drive to save you expense, dear."

"To save me expense," I echoed sardonically, "quite so!" When a woman starts saving expense by recklessly driving a motor car we all know what to expect.

"You would not have a lady to drive, so I thought I might as well——"

"Rather an ambiguous speech if I may be permitted to say so——"

"Pam thought so too, and we are learning and getting on nicely." Gertrude used rather a defiant tone for a wife. "He says——"

"*Who* says? I conclude you went to Blank for an instructor?"

"No dear, that would have cost you money too. We learned free."

"From whom?"

"Burn dear——"

"Burn dear!" I repeated, "Really Gertrude!"

"I only forgot the comma," she said, and added in a rush, "It was awfully good of him to take all the trouble. We took it out this morning, and——"

"After I had started for the train, I presume?"

"It might have been about that time," owned Gertrude with a sickly smile, "I didn't happen to look at the clock."

"And you have been motoring till now?"

"We took the picnic basket. Cecil Burn says——"

"Did you ask to see his Licence?"

Gertrude looked as if I had suggested some rank impropriety, "I could not ask him a thing like that!" she gasped. "He'd had the loan of a car the day before."

I pounced, "A War-office car? What happened to it?"

"How should I know," returned my wife in an evasive manner.

"Does the 'old fossil' know? Does the W. O. know?"

"I don't know anything about it," she returned obstinately, and I realised she refused, for the best of all possible reason, to know.

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I still kept calm, "If it would not be troubling you too much I would like the bill for repairs at your earliest convenience," I said.

"Nothing happened to *this* car," returned Gertrude thankfully. "We went to Dallington, all driving in turn——"

"I had forgotten the joy-ride season had commenced," I retorted.

Then I looked round and saw no sign of Pam. My heart seemed to stop beating. I seized Gertrude by the arm, but even in my agitation I spoke quite quietly, "Would it be too much," I enquired, "to ask at which hospital you left my daughter?"

She twitched herself away, "It's not Pam's Red-Cross day," she said shortly, "she and Cecil are having a single on the lower lawn, and I wish you would not talk of 'my daughter' like that, as if she did not belong to me at all. It's not quite nice, and I'm sure the likeness of face and voice and figure is extraordinary. Everybody says so." She assumed her pathetic voice and expression and added, "Why do you try and forget she's mine too?"

"Don't be absurd!" I said irritated with this inconsistency.

"Oh Billy, and after all the things you said at the altar!"

So like a woman; as if she had not said things too. She had vowed more than I had, and kept much less. Had I not kept every vow ever sworn?

To cherish her in sickness and in health——and the doctor's bills had been no small item. To forsake all others and so on? Forsake was a mild word for all the forsaking I had done. I had been blind to alluring eyes, deaf to the siren voices. Never had there been a more faithful, unselfish, indulgent husband, but was Gertrude satisfied? She wasn't. Was she grateful? Not in the least. Did she even realise all my self-sacrifice and self-abnegation? She blanketty well didn't! It was enough to try a saint. And she? What had she done? All the things a wife ought not to have done, leaving undone all the things a wife should have done.

Perhaps my voice was a little bitter as I said:

"I think you vowed a few trifles too; to 'honour and obey' for instance, but perhaps it is more convenient to forget it."

"I always obey you when you order me to do reasonable things," she returned with all a woman's hopeless illogic.

"We will not discuss it," I said impatiently, "We're married and that's the end of it, and must make the best of it, I suppose." I spend my life making the best of it, but I get no help from my partner. "At least do not force a quarrel on me before the children."

Her eyes filled with tears——and there you are! They began to drip down her cheeks, and that's a thing I can't stand. When a woman gets the worst

of an argument she begins to cry, and you have to make it up against your better judgment. I'm one of those soft-hearted men that can't endure a woman crying all over the place. I could not stand even my own wife in tears.

I kissed her and said the usual idiotic things, such as apologising for her and for the things I had not said or done, and saying I did not mean them. It's a bad way of bringing up a wife but it's the shortest cut to harmony.

Gertrude recovered at once. She took my arm and said:

"Of course I know your bark is worse than your bite, and that it's just a little way you have. I knew you'd be pleased really that I can drive so nicely. Now about the lady-gardener, darling? Smith her name is——"

"Dearest," I said, "I have given you permission to learn to drive the car, but a lady-gardener is another thing. We will not have such a female, one called Smith or anything else." I spoke very gently, but quite firmly.

Smith! Of course I hated the name! Rosaleen had taken it in place of mine, which is as picturesque as a British name can decently be. How often she must have regretted her Smith, my luckless Rosaleen!

"You would expect me to call this creature Smith, give her orders." I objected. "Or should I have

to call her Miss Smith and ask her nicely to be kind enough to pull up that weed?"

"You could call her whatever you liked, dear, I'm sure she would not mind, though never the things you used to call poor Edwards."

"Well anyway she isn't coming here," I said.

My wife took me round the garden and made me look at it. It was not an encouraging sight. "Pam and I work very hard," she sighed, "but we don't seem to have the knack. The things know it and take advantage of us. Look at those tulips, they would never have dreamed of behaving like that to Edwards. We all know what servants are, but it's a nice thing when one's flowers turn against one too. Miss Smith knows all about such things, and loves them, and her references——"

"Women gardeners!" I retorted. "They can't or won't work! Nobody could make them!"

"Miss Smith——"

"I refuse to hear another word of the woman. I don't want any Smiths here——"

"I know you have a prejudice against the name," began Gertrude.

"You had a prejudice against your own," I reminded her, deftly getting off dangerous ground.

Gertrude's maiden name had been Bluggins, and she had frankly owned that it was terrible to go through life for thirty-two years with a name like that. I wondered why she had endured it so long;

she could not have guessed she was ever going to have mine. She was a handsome girl, if not to everybody's taste, and I had known one man who had proposed to her with brazen persistence for years. She always said 'that sort of thing is Fate' when I asked her, and changed the subject.

We had grown up in the same village, and our people had been friends, her father the vicar, mine the doctor. Sometimes when Rosaleen, who lived in the next county, had refused me again, or we had had another tragic parting, I would find Gertrude soothing and sympathetic, though unconsciously so, for she guessed nothing of my unhappy love affair. Gertrude and I were excellent friends before we were married.

Gertrude laughed and hugged my arm, "Yes I did hate it," she confessed, "Do you know what I kept saying over and over again before the altar?"

"Perhaps I can guess," I returned pressing her arm. She would be murmuring her vows, and thanking God kneeling for a good man's love. She had looked rather decent that day.

"Of course you can! I was murmuring my new name over and over again, and thinking how lovely it was. Then, do you remember me kissing the curate?"

"I do," I said rather coldly. I had not approved of that action then; I did not approve of it now.

"Well, he was the first to address me by it, and

he had christened me. I loved everybody that called me by it that day."

"I hope you had a thought to spare for the man who had given it you," I said gravely.

"Oh, Billy!"

I pressed her arm again. Sometimes I have thought she was not sufficiently grateful for all the blessings of her life, but I realised I had done her an injustice.

"I *am* glad I'm not Bluggins any more!" she added.

"So am I!" I said gallantly.

"Billy you can be a perfect darling when you like, I wish——"

"What?"

"Oh nothing! But we don't get on so badly and it might be worse, mightn't it?" Her voice was quick and eager. That's a woman all over! Give her an inch and she demands an ell.

"Of course it might be worse," I admitted, for things can always be that, "And I think we could always get on quite well if only you were a little different, Gertrude."

She sighed, "But it's so difficult to make oneself all over again; and I should have to be undoing myself and remaking myself all the time before you would pronounce the garment a perfect fit. But I've got a lovely name. When the bottom is knocked out of one's world there is always that to

fall back on; one can't fall back on a name like Bluggins. You will never guess how it has helped me to bear and forbear——"

"Bear what?"

"Domestic worries, dear."

"Yes, servants are very difficult," I owned.

I was glad she really appreciated things. There was Rosaleen who had married a Smith and lost all the money in a few months. What a contrast to the happy careless lot of Gertrude! Still I could not understand what she meant by the bottom falling out of her world. She had everything that the heart of woman could desire, and much more than she had ever expected. "What do you especially complain of?" I asked.

"Complain of? Oh nothing," she said quickly, "it is not that exactly. Only Life is strange isn't it? It cheats us so. Experience and reality overshadow the dreams, strangle them, and it is not always easy to help a little bitterness creeping in. When you let the bitterness creep in you have a fox that gnaws your vitals. They say it is the greatest tragedy not to realise our heart's desire. . . ."

"So it is," I sighed. Did I not know it?

She turned on me almost passionately, her lips quivering, her eyes full of an expression that startled me. "They are wrong," she said. "By far the greatest tragedy is to realise one's heart's desire."

"My dear!" I expostulated. If I had realised mine Rosaleen would have been my wife instead of Gertrude. How could that be a tragedy? Not but that I should feel it quite a wrench to part with Gertrude. After all, nineteen years has got to count for much.

She took no notice, "To hope for it, work for it, pray for it," she went on, "to agonise for it! Then to get it—and find we have only grasped the shadow after all. The substance, all that matters, has eluded us. We walk in the shadows, a shadow amidst shadows. . . ."

"Gertrude," I said, "you must take a liver pill to-night." I knew what was wrong; her digestion was upset.

She turned on me fiercely, "Oh, I could hate you at times!"

"*Two* liver pills," I said firmly. Or was it nerves? If there was one thing I could not endure in a wife it would be nerves. Now Gertrude is one of those commonplace people without nerves, almost without a temperament. "Your stomach is out of order," I added, "Lobsters are dangerous eaten in excess to a woman of your age. Why have you such a love for them?"

"Why did Fate make me love the worthless and the dangerous?" she retorted. "I don't know. Ask Fate."

"Can't you be sensible and leave off?" I asked.

"No," she said curtly, "if it could survive what it has survived it must be imperishable."

I laughed, "We started with heart's desires and got to lobsters. Rather humorous!"

"Very! Was it lobsters?"

I wondered what Gertrude's heart's desire had really been; her love for lobsters was but the craving of the lower woman. She had not married till she was thirty-two and then she had married me. Had there been someone first; some 'heart's desire,' as she so romantically expressed it? Women are very sentimental, though Gertrude had little, almost too little, of this feminine trait. Was there a reason? Had she also loved and lost?

Such an idea had never occurred to me, and I cannot say I cared for it much now it did occur. To begin with, women have an absurd way of living in the past, of comparing the present to it, and comparing the present unfavourably. Not quite playing the game, I consider. A thing that is done with, is done with—or ought to be.

A man is so different from a woman. Marriage is for him merely an incident or a misfortune, unless of course he marries the one rare woman, and how often does he find he has done that? For a woman marriage is everything—at least it should be, but modern women have rather a distressing way of talking about it, even criticising it. A nice woman knows it is her very life, her fulfilment; the

beginning and the end. A man has given her husband, home, children, everything her heart can desire. It is only fair that she should give something to her husband; the virtues one takes for granted, and a heart free of old rubbish, eager to enshrine the One.

I must say if I thought that Gertrude had not come to me free of other men and other memories, I should have been exceedingly annoyed, and most justly, I consider. Still I could thrust away little devil doubt like the trustful husband I was. She had always been so practicable, so absolutely sensible. I am thankful to say she was not a romantic woman, any more than she was out of the ordinary, or charming, fascinating or elusive. Those sort of things are all very well in other women; in a wife they are out of place.

"Well, old girl," I said rather awkwardly, for there was something in her eyes that made me feel bad, "there are always the children, aren't there?" I took her hand and pressed it encouragingly. "Indeed in a sort of way I consider our marriage quite a success, I do really. You have always made me most comfortable."

"I do believe that is the very first compliment on the matter you have ever paid me," she said in her odd voice. "I am thankful to know, that thanks to the children, our marriage is a success."

Then she took her hand away and went into the house.

I found the others, and again Pam and I wiped the floor with the two lads.

At dinner that night we were all extra merry, I think. I had never seen Gertrude more cheerful, and I was thankful she had got over her morbid mood.

Rosaleen had always been gay, though once—poignant memory!—she had cried down my neck because other women were so spiteful to her. They always had been spiteful to my poor darling, because she was so beautiful and wonderful I suppose, so far above them in every way. They could not hope to be like her, or understand her, but they could be jealous and spiteful and say wicked things. They could call her 'flirt' and 'adventuress.' They could say she threw over the man who loved her for a middle-aged man with money, and that it served her right when she lost it. They could call her a sly little cat.

Gertrude alone never said a word about her, or indeed mentioned her at all if she could help it. Of course she knew her slightly, and knew that I knew her too, but not how well.

We were poor for the first year of our marriage, and then the uncle who had called me his heir, and then suddenly married a young wife, lost wife and baby, and made me his heir again. A

few months later he died himself and I came in for a considerable sum of money, and an old-established and flourishing business. At first I almost hated the money. It was dreadful to have so much and to think of the vanished Rosaleen with nothing. Then I had never felt our poverty; Gertrude was such a skilful manager and always had everything dainty and nice. But then Pam came, making up for everything, and I was glad of the money. There was her future now. Things became much easier. I did not forget, I can never do that, but the sharper agony had gone. Sometimes I would be as happy and light-hearted as ever. I would not sacrifice Pam to have Rosaleen, but I should like to have Rosaleen as well.

Alas, in this world things are not so easily arranged as all that. Mr. Smith had Rosaleen, and I had Gertrude.

CHAPTER VI

HOW WIVES PERSIST IN THEIR OWN WAY

THE next day Perkins met me in the hall with a lugubrious expression. Perkins is what is known by outsiders as our butler. As a matter of fact, he is much more our guide, philosopher, and friend. He was my uncle's butler and descended to me as part of the legacy. To him I am still a mere youth and 'Master Willy' when we are alone. I was Master Willy now. He is over sixty and looks more like a benign rural dean than I have ever seen a benign rural dean look. He hates opposition and Liberals, Radicals or Socialists are something criminal and unclean that could not be mentioned in decent society. It was a good thing for me that my politics agreed with his.

He took my hat, jerked my coat down at the back where it is a little inclined to ruck up, turned me slowly round for inspection, and said:

"Master Willy, she's come."

"Who?" I asked. My wife has many visitors, but Perkins does not become tragic over them.

Could it be a Bluggins relative? He would certainly resent that, but then Gertrude would resent it too, and it did not seem very likely. She was almost passionately anxious that no one should connect her with the name of Bluggins.

"The lady-gardener—God help us!" he returned.

I jumped. *"What!"* I thundered.

"You might well say what, Master Willy. What them Socialists will be bringing on us next I can't think. Things are not what they used to be, what with women here and there, married and unmarried, doing of this and that. In my day Master Willy spinsters kept to their place; now you meet them in the best houses. This 'un is called Smith. Is it your pleasure I should call her Smith, Master Willy? Call her Smith, her being what she is, won't be pleasant for me at my time of life, but to call her 'Miss Smith' her being the gardener, is more than I could bear."

"You won't have to call her anything," I said briskly, "I am going to dismiss her at once."

Perkins only went on shaking his head and mumbling.

"Where is she?" I asked sharply. Wasn't it exactly like Gertrude? To conceal her on the premises and then leave it to me to get her off them?

"In the garding; digging is what they calls it, I believe. God knows what Edwards would have

called it! How the Almighty can allow lady-gardeners and Germans to go mucking about——"

I hurried into the garden. My blood was up and I had no intention of standing any nonsense. Tears, prayers, excuses, none of them would avail with me. I wanted someone who worked and stopped at it. I did not want to have to do *everything* myself. Digging for a man of my type was sheerly absurd.

I must say I was amazed to find a young girl digging away as if her life depended upon it. Compared to Pam she was not beautiful, but apart from that she was attractive—and a lady. She had a clear brown skin, but her face was grave; her eyes and mouth rather sad. When she saw me, however, she looked up with a smile that seemed like a gleam of sunshine dispersing the clouds. She was tall and slim and strong-looking. Her hair was of that purple black that I must confess appeals to me. It was just like Rosaleen's.

I was rather shocked at her slaving like that, and took the spade from her, "Allow me," I said, and dug quite a decent little bit. It does not do to allow the modern woman to look upon man as a decadent being. Women admire muscles more than brains. You cannot always show your brains so as to make them plain to them, but you can always exhibit your muscles.

I could see the girl was impressed.

"How beautifully you dig," she said, and then addressed me by my name.

"How well you guess," I retorted gaily, "And you are Miss Smith of course, the new gardener? Delighted, I assure you. You have no idea the trouble I have had to get somebody." I held out my hand and she shook it heartily.

"You *are* a pleasant surprise," she said in her delightful frank way, "Some men are so fussy and absurd about innovations, so prejudiced."

"I know," I said gravely, "I have met men like that. Myself I believe in going with the times."

"It makes such a difference whether one goes willingly or is *dragged* by the times, doesn't it?" She had a nice laugh. I took to the girl; she was the type any man might be glad to own as daughter, any young man as wife. She could have been little older than my Pam. It made me feel rather bad to think of Pam thrust out into the cold world, trying to earn her living in some unappreciative brute's garden.

I agreed that it was better to go than be dragged any day.

"My last employer had to be dragged and pushed and shoved, and I had to leave rather suddenly. His wife got me without him knowing; then he found out and rushed into the garden like a tornado and gave me notice."

"The blackguard!" I exclaimed disgusted.

"Oh well, it was his own garden, you know, and he had a prejudice against lady gardeners."

"No excuse at all!"

"Don't you think so? Your wife has been so kind to me! Do you mind me saying that I think she is a perfect dear?"

"Not at all," I said genially, concealing my astonishment. It seemed an odd way to describe Gertrude, but then of course the girl did not really know her.

"She said I need not be afraid of you——"

"I should think not indeed."

"She said you would be kind to me too; that *you* were entirely without prejudices."

"I suppose one's wife should know," I owned.

"It was a relief to get here! Such a dear little lodge to live in! Such a lovely garden, but it *has* run wild, hasn't it? I am dying to get it into order."

"You must not work too hard," I said anxiously, "that would never do. Why you are getting hot already. Do sit down and get cool, and tell me how you learned so much. You are very young."

I felt quite a fatherly interest in the plucky young thing. I did hope she would be happy with us and stay. I must take her for a spin in the car and see that it was not all work and no play.

She sighed a little, "I don't feel young," she said, "I am nineteen."

"My dear——" I began warmly, then I apologised and explained that I had a daughter of my own about her age.

"Oh I understood," she said smiling. "Nobody remembers what I was christened, but I'm always called Tommy. Will you call me Tommy?"

"May I really," I asked. "Tommy?"

We both laughed.

"And what part of the world do you hail from?" I went on.

"The Colonies, I am Canadian. I worked on a farm out there, but I came home when the war broke out and trained as gardener."

"Lucky for us you did," I said. "Left your people out there?"

"My father is dead. It was after that I came over."

"You have a mother?" I ventured. I did not like to think of her alone in the world.

Her face grew grave and rather strained and for a moment she did not answer; then she said:

"My mother is over staying with friends at present."

I felt I must drop the subject of the mother and wondered what lay behind it all. "No brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"Nobody," she said.

I patted the poor child's shoulder. "Somebody now, I hope," I said. "You must try and feel

that this is your home. Pam will love to have a girl-friend on the premises. Pam is my daughter. Not a bad-looking girl."

"I'm sure she isn't," she said looking at me.

"Rupert," I went on, "has left school, but he does not yet admit the other sex into his life. He is a regular schoolboy still."

"How jolly," she said, "I like that best." Then she fell to digging with an energy that made me hot to watch. She seemed positively to enjoy it. I always think Colonials are different from us in some ways.

I saw Gertrude in the distance and went to meet her.

"So you have got your own way as usual," I said sternly.

She linked her arm in mine, "It was all for your sake, darling, I felt you would like Smith. I do hope she will give you every satisfaction, the references were splendid."

"She is quite a young girl——"

"Yes dear, but you do not mind, do you? I thought if you found a severe middle-aged woman about you might not care for it. You might even dismiss her." Her deep blue eyes twinkled into mine, and I twinkled back. I do not know if I have mentioned that Gertrude has rather handsome blue eyes.

"I might have," I owned, "A man's a man for all that."

"I felt sure you would not dismiss Smith——"

"Tommy," I corrected.

Gertrude laughed outright, "Tommy by all means."

"Of course I had not the heart to dismiss the child: it would have been too cruel."

"Oh Billy, how like a man! It would have been so much more cruel to have dismissed the other because she was elderly and ugly. For youth the gates are opening; for the elderly they have closed."

"Well I should not think of dismissing any woman," I said hastily, "Don't be morbid, dear. The gates are open all the time if we keep a glad heart."

She hugged my arm, "Oh Billy, how sweet of you! Why don't you say things like that oftener, instead of——"

"Continue, my dear?"

"Oh it's nothing! I took care to get a good bargain. She's strong and really loves and knows her work. Her father is dead, but she seems rather stiff when one mentions the mother."

"Yes, there's obviously something," I nodded, "My own idea is that she drinks."

Gertrude feared it might be possible, but of course had to find an excuse for the horrid creature. "Perhaps her husband drove her to it," she said. "Everybody hasn't the strength to stand up

against disappointment and things, and drink is so easy."

"Well, don't let me find you taking to it," I joked. "Though I don't know what excuse you would find in your case."

"A woman can always find an excuse," said Gertrude, which indeed is only too true.

When I went into the house, Perkins pounced on me, "When is she going, Master Willy?"

"If you allude to the new lady-gardener, Miss Smith is not going at all I hope," I answered. "She will stay and be in every way as a member of the family, and you will be good enough to remember it, Perkins!"

"I knew it!" exclaimed my butler.

Tommy became one of us from the start, but, to use Rupert's word, she was a 'nailer' for work and insisted upon putting it first. She did more than Edwards had ever done; Gertrude said she did more than anybody had ever done.

She strolled up one day when Rupert and I were helping her to get through the day's task, and sat down and looked at us with a funny expression.

"That girl has done in a few days, what I have vainly sought to do in nineteen years," she said.

Of course I guessed what she meant, "It's the force of example," I explained. "Hang it all, one can't watch a lady work."

"You used to watch me," she said.

"But *you* were my wife."

"Of course that does make a difference, doesn't it Billy?"

"And anyway I didn't watch you much," I reminded her virtuously, "I merely kept away."

"A distinction without a difference," said Gertrude.

CHAPTER VII

HOW WIVES CAN FUSS ENOUGH OVER OTHERS

WHEN I was a boy at school, and a big bug there, I had a letter from a female relative. I think, and trust, that the female relative of to-day is different from my Aunt Jemima. To begin with we don't condemn girls to being the type of person that any one called Jemima must become. A boy knows what a female relative can be at her worst and this was the extreme limit.

How it all comes back to me, and, hang it all, it was not so many years ago! I feel that boy of seventeen again. I am a Prefect, very conscious of my own dignity and importance, very sensitive to ridicule. I fear no foe in shining armour but I fear ridicule exceedingly. I would die sooner than appear ridiculous.

Then imagine what I felt to receive a letter like this:

"Dear Billy,

Some friends of mine have charge of a dear little boy of six, but they can't keep him any

longer. I suggested he should be sent to the Preparatory School attached to yours. I said I knew you would gladly keep an eye on him—a poor little fellow with no parents or relations, and only just enough money to see him through school and start him in something. Such a good-looking child too. They have arranged it and he arrives at 12.15 to-day. Of course there will be somebody to meet him from the school, but I said I would ask you to go too, and my friends want me to thank you very much, and say how satisfied it makes them feel. He won't be lonely now. I am sure you will get on splendidly together.

In frantic haste,
Your loving aunt,
Jemima."

I cannot remember what were the special terms of offence then. 'Swine,' 'blighter,' and 'perisher' had not yet come to their own, but doubtless there were others as effective, and it is certain that I used them all.

I act nurse! I accompany a howling baby from the train to the Preparatory School, which, needless to say, had nothing to do with us. No damn fear! The kid could stay at the station till the crack of doom for all I cared. If he fell under the train so much the better and a jolly good riddance!

Then the words '12.15' bid me pause. At 12.15 I had a lesson that I especially abhorred. Even the station would be better than that. I had but to show the letter to the Head, and the thing was done. I showed it to him, and burned it very carefully afterwards. The boys must not guess I had such relatives or received such letters, nor above all must they surmise my errand, but the Head did not count. He gave me permission and I set off for the station.

I was an honest boy as boys go. I had asked leave to meet the kid and I would meet him, but I should do no more. He would not dare to howl when I got a grip of him—what brutes boys are! In imagination I saw him—a curled peevish mother's darling. I had either forgotten that he had no mother or was annoyed at my aunt's bid for my sympathy. Long golden curls, and picture sexless clothes! This was the thing I would get on splendidly with! As if an infant of six and a boy of seventeen are in the same world. Why I was old enough to be his father—a different generation.

As I got to the station, the train came in, and the very type of child I had pictured, howling and kicking, was lifted out of a first-class carriage. I was about to grab it—and shake it, when the woman with it said:

"Hush Nelly, hush!"

I fled.

Then something grabbed me by the coat, and a clear reverent voice said:

"Please sir are you the gentleman Miss Jemima said would meet me? Is there foot-ball at my school? I've got boots and a jersey."

The little beggar was obviously carrying them in a parcel; too precious to be packed, I suppose. I don't know yet whether it was the 'sir' that did it, or the boots and jersey, but I took to that kid, a well plucked 'un, and no mistake, and we *did* see a great deal of each other, and we *did* get on well together. I was fond of him, and the way he looked up to me was a fair treat. I had only another couple of terms at school, but the connection was never dropped. I had no brother, and he had nobody at all, and in spite of the eleven years between us,—a generation at our respective ages,—we really were as brothers.

When at eighteen, shortly before Rosaleen and I had parted and I had become engaged to Gertrude, he left for Canada, it was I who saw him off, I who gave him a good time in Town first. His name was John Harris and in all the years we had never met, but we had always corresponded. He had done well in Canada. Just before the war broke out he had sold his interests there and was coming home for good. I had been greatly looking forward to it. Instead he went off with the

first contingent to train and fight. He had been in Flanders for months.

Now I got a letter from him to say he was invalided out of the army with a hip trouble, which would leave him with a bad limp, and was due at Victoria that very day.

I found Gertrude, "John Harris is coming to stay with us!" I shouted joyfully.

"Yes dear I'm awfully glad too, but who *is* John Harris?"

"It sounds like Betsy Gamp," said Pam, "What a dull name!"

I explained briefly. "We were at school together, then he went to Canada: now he's coming home invalided from the Front. He is going to buy a place of his own in England."

"Married?" asked Gertrude.

"Good gracious no!"

"Fancy putting a poor old beast like that in the trenches!" said Pam, "What is he? A private or a colonel?"

"Neither, he was captain," I returned.

"Poor old thing, what a shame, and quite little boys are captains these days!"

"You need not talk as if he was in his second childhood, my dear," I observed.

"I was only talking as if he was your schoolfellow, which you said he was, Old Thing. Poor

Mr. Harris! I'll make his room look ever so." She began cutting flowers there and then.

I got out the car and rushed off to Victoria. I did not want old John to be kept waiting, for his welcome to lack anything. In our boyhood there had been years between us. Now we were contemporaries, both middle-aged men when eleven years is as nothing. The man of thirty-eight and the man of forty-nine are equals in every way. His hair was greyer than mine, and I daresay many would have supposed me the younger of the two. It was good to see him again.

I wrung his hand, "Twenty years!" was all I could say. Twenty years and it seemed like twenty months. How swiftly run the sands of life!

He was bigger and gaunter than when I had last seen him, not as handsome perhaps, but his strong rugged face had a charm of its own, and he was a distinguished looking man. He limped badly and used a crutch. His mouth was drawn with the pain he had suffered or the sights he had seen. He had still the clear grave eyes of his youth and the vivid smile. If his hair was grey it was not scanty.

I have to make mine 'do' if you know what I mean. If you are a man of close on fifty you will probably know all about it without telling, and realise the irony of things that permit us in our thick-haired youthful days to do it in five minutes, and to take several five minutes when there is prac-

tically nothing of it to do. Still I had not a grey hair and that is always something; neither had Gertrude any grey hairs either, though at her age one might expect it. The first of us to find one was vowed to present it and a sovereign to the other. Perhaps it was not quite a fair bet as I had the years to the good, but I will say Gertrude is always a sport, and took me on at once. And she always plays the game. She's not the kind of person to put on something with a tooth-brush and say that in her family they go grey very late, and only then under the most exceptional circumstances.

"Fair hair goes first," I warned her.

Perhaps I had laughed a little wrily at her answer: "But dark hair goes fastest, Billy o' mine. Suppose there is nothing left to go grey. Who wins then?"

I wound her long thick plait round my fingers, "You, my dear," I conceded. Gertrude has rather nice-coloured hair—for a fair woman, and plenty of it. I must say it looks very well when it's made into those big waves—if only results could be obtained without processes! However there is always something.

Well, I got John into the car, and I let her out I can tell you. Canadians are such go-ahead fellows, rather apt to remark that the 'Old Country' is all right in its way, but slow—distinctly slow. I came up the drive in some style, a style that it will take

these lady-chauffeurs some time to equal, I fancy. After all it takes a man to do most things properly. I drew up with a sweep that would have made most drivers envious.

Pam rushed down the steps. "If it isn't Dad! I thought it was the W. O. again! What about the speed limit! Suppose *we* had done that to the precious drive. Tommy will have her work cut out filling in those ruts. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Harris. We *are* glad you have come." She beamed on him, shaking his hand up and down. She had caught sight of the crutch of course.

"Thank you," returned John simply, giving her a long intent look.

"My daughter Pamela," I explained, "It seems rather ridiculous, doesn't it?" I drew her to me. "I thought she was just a little girl, but her mother insists she's grown up."

"Well—she ought to know," returned John with his vivid smile. He looked at Pamela hard again, and she looked at him.

I gave him a hand up the steps, "We married men have our gains as well as our losses," I said. "I daresay you would not mind Pam for a daughter yourself, old fellow?"

John did not answer for a moment, then he said slowly, "I think I prefer her as she is, Billy," a reply that disappointed me a little. I could not understand anybody not wanting Pam.

Then Gertrude appeared. Of course she had not expected us so soon, and I doubt whether many drivers could have done it in the time. She gave my old school-fellow a warm welcome. I can always bring my friends home and know them assured of that. Gertrude invariably gets on with them, and they with her. She is so thoroughly sensible, and it is a useful quality after all. People used to call her a 'motherly' girl. I know I used to find her comforting after a parting with Rosaleen, and always go to her in any difficulty. She at once started being motherly with John. I think it was the crutch and the difficulty he had to get upstairs that did it. She made him lie down on his bed and rest and brought him his tea there. Then she unpacked his things herself and showed him where she put them, and took an armful down to mend. In fact she made a regular fuss over John. I was glad of course, but once or twice I thought she over-did it a trifle. *She* had not known him for thirty-two years as I had; she did not know him at all.

I sat with him smoking while he rested, and he looked out over the fine country view his windows presented and gave a long sigh of content.

"Home at last," he said, "and I never thought to see it again. My God, the many that never will!"

We smoked in silence. To him the tragedy of

war was great; but to me it was greater. He had done his bit; I was only a looker-on. He had helped to shoulder the great burden of Empire; had faced the heat and the cold; the bitterness of defeat and of victory.

"Oh——!" I burst out suddenly. John and I always understood each other.

He nodded gravely, then his smile flashed out, "As lurid as ever, old man!"

"It's so—so. . . . I am such a futile ass——"

"To each of us our particular cross." Then he put his pipe in his pocket, "A ripping place you've got here. You're a lucky devil in every way."

"You must get another place like it, and be another lucky devil too."

He sighed, "That won't be so easy," he said. "I don't want to live even in the most delightful place alone, and——"

"You must marry of course," I advised. After all men of our age do marry. "Some sensible woman not too young."

He said he supposed so, but did not sound enthusiastic.

"There's the Haighlands for sale," I remarked, "though Pam will be cross if you steal her dream house."

"Ah. . . ." he said thoughtfully, and added, "I will buy the Haighlands."

"But Good Lord, you haven't seen it——"

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"The recommendation is enough——"

I was pleased that he was ready to take a place on my lightest word, "The Haighlands first," I laughed, "then the wife."

"I'm a lame dog now and no longer young," he said half to himself, "and I've jolly well got to remember it and play fair."

"My dear fellow it's not as if you proposed to marry a young girl—that would be ridiculous of course. There are women enough and to spare, plenty of choice, old man, plenty of choice!"

He was silent.

"One settles down to it," I said encouragingly, "it's not so bad after the first."

He looked surprised. I wonder if he supposed it bad all the time. "One shakes down wonderfully," I went on, "and then there's the daughter—and the son of course. That's what helps."

"You've got more than your share," he said to me, "I have not seen your boy yet, but your wife and daughter speak for themselves. What a likeness!"

I was pleased he should notice it, for Gertrude will never admit it. Everybody knows that the daughter most often takes after the father, and the son after the mother.

"Not only face and expression," he went on, "but the same wonderful poise of the figure."

I decided to tell Gertrude. To hear her talk one

might suppose I had said good-bye to a poise these many years! It takes an outsider to see likenesses and I could rely absolutely on John. He had always been sharp as they make 'em. . . .

"May I say that I think your wife one of the most charming and delightful of women?"

"Of course you may," I replied pleased, "I am really more lucky than I deserve to be." At the same time I was astonished. I should not have described Gertrude in those terms myself, but of course one cannot always go by the ideas of outsiders. He seemed ready to rave about her, and she is not at all that sort of woman I can assure you. She is absolutely ordinary in every way, and not only is she ordinary but she can be very aggravating at times, still that's a common trait of her sex as I happen to know.

Then he spoke as if she was of my generation, even younger; and to me it was extraordinary that he had not noticed the obvious disparity between us. Perhaps in the wilds one loses the finer perceptions. He little guessed the secret sorrow ever gnawing at my heart! Of course it was very gratifying to hear all these things about Gertrude, who after all was my wife, but I expetced him to rave about Pam, as everything male does, and he seemed almost to ignore her.

"Quite so," I agreed absently, and added, "Pam is a great responsibility. She's not in the least like

the average young girl, so much finer in every way if you know what I mean, and of course men find it out, and it's not easy keeping them off, I can tell you."

"Keep them off? But is that fair to. . . . Miss Pamela?"

"Oh, call her Pam too," I said, "why you might be her uncle, mightn't you?"

"Possibly," he agreed after thinking it over, "I am twenty years her senior aren't I, and an old crock at that?" He laughed.

"Oh well, time will race on," I sighed, "we're middle-aged men and there's the end of it. There's a most pestilential young man who won't leave us alone."

"Only one," he said, "in Canada there would be hundreds."

"Then, thank Heaven we're not in Canada," I returned with heat, "it's more than I can stand as it is I tell you."

"But surely *you* of all people must believe in marriage——"

"I don't believe in children marrying," I said curtly, "and what do you mean me, of all people? Things are not always what they appear on the surface. Gertrude is excellent in many ways, but she is hardly sympathetic or understanding, and I am a man with a temperament." That's the worst of old bachelors. How should they realise what a

man has to go through before his marriage,—and after it too. They go by the thing they can see, and are hopelessly at sea most of the time.

"But that was what struck me," he said. "Her perfect understanding of you."

I wondered what he would have said if he had guessed about Rosaleen. That would open his eyes a bit; make him realise the canker at the root of things.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I was in love with another girl. I only proposed to Gertrude in a temper. I was thunderstruck when she accepted me."

"The reason she accepted you was obvious, I fancy," returned John, "Why man, you've had uncanny luck! What a lot you owe to those women! Much to your wife for accepting you, but infinitely more to the other."

I smiled patiently. Poor old John how could he understand! "I loved Rosaleen all my life," I said rather brokenly I am afraid, "I love her still. I shall love her when I'm under the sod. Nothing can ever make any difference to me." I cleared my throat.

I could see John was startled at last. "Well I never!" he said, "Fancy that now!"

"It was one of those first-sight affairs," I went on.

He was obviously interested, "Do you know I

have always believed in love at first sight," he said thoughtfully, "Now, I believe in it more than ever."

I could see I was opening the old fellow's eyes. "I arranged for Pamela to be called Rosaleen," I went on, "though Gertrude had some silly prejudice against the name. Of course if she had guessed at my tragedy I could have understood it, but she never has guessed. She believes me happy, light-hearted! The irony of it! She and the Vicar, an interfering officious old ass, christened her Pamela under my very nose! Of course I've got accustomed to the name now——"

"Pamela," said John softly, and again, "Pamela."

I could see he liked the name all right. "To have loved a Rosaleen and have married a Gertrude!" I exclaimed, "Ah John, Destiny plays strange tricks with us!"

"Destiny knows her business all right—in some cases," he returned.

"She dropped a wretched young man into my pear-tree," I complained, "and of course he is running after Pam. Mind you, I do not say the child shall never marry, but I do most emphatically declare she shall not become engaged before she is twenty-one, and only then to someone I have found for her myself."

"Billy, you ask too much of life. That Pamela of yours will choose her own mate, you mark my

words. She has all her mother's decision of character, all her depth too. Some young man will come along, he won't be good enough for her of course, but she will think so, and. . . . she will have him. I hope he will realise his luck, that's all."

I changed the subject. John was so absurdly sure it made me quite uncomfortable. I discussed him with Gertrude later on, I said:

"The old fellow noticed the likeness at once." Gertrude smiled, "There are few things he does not notice, I imagine."

"*He* doesn't seem to think I have changed so much in the twenty years; grown fat and bald and beastly——"

"Really dear, who ever said——"

"Nobody *said* anything," I returned, "but there are ways of implying things. By the bye, he said some things about you that should make your ears burn, old lady."

"As bad as that, Billy."

"No, as nice as that," I returned giving the rather shapely ear nearest to me a tweak.

"Do tell me like a perfect darling." Gertrude has rather coaxing ways, though sometimes when she is trying to make me do something I have no intention of doing, I can't help thinking they are out of place in a woman of her age, whether she looks it or not.

I told her some of them; not quite all. Women

are so incurably vain, and it does not do to encourage this weakness too far.

"I suppose you thought them all perfectly absurd and contradicted him. Did you, Billy?" She leaned up against me.

I could conscientiously say I had not contradicted John. Putting a man right is not contradicting him. "Well, I bore it like a husband," I added.

"Did he even think me fairly decent looking?" Like the rest of her sex Gertrude was never satisfied. Her maw for flattery was insatiable.

I took up a brush and did my hair. We were dressing for dinner and I had gone to see if she were ready.

She came and looked over my shoulder into the glass and I must own she didn't look so bad like that. We went nicely together as dark and fair always do.

"Funny isn't it," she observed, "but I always meant to have a dark one. We match rather well, don't we?"

"Not so badly," I had to admit. Certainly Gertrude's fair skin and hair showed me up extremely well, made me look very brown and virile. I suppose when one is writing about one's self one should be as frank as to one's physical advantages as to one's weaknesses. Well I am considered rather a handsome man. I have very dark eyes, a hook nose, only not too hook, mind you, a firm well-cut

mouth, one that well affords to be clean-shaven, and a well-defined chin. I am not tall and I am not slim, but I move well, and my skin is ruddy brown. My hair is extremely black which is lucky as it is placed now. I think, that without vanity, I might be described as a 'striking looking' man.

"Yes, dark as dark," she went on.

"What about that fellow, Carne, who was always proposing to you?" I said tactlessly. "He was dark enough, swarthy almost, and not bad looking in his way. Why did you wait till thirty-two and chance it? It was such a chance after all, wasn't it, and Carne was after you for years?"

"Oh him. . . . !" she said slightingly.

"That's all very well, but you might have got left, my dear. What then?"

She set her mouth in a determined way, "I knew what I was prepared to risk," she returned.

"But you must have been so surprised when I rushed in and proposed to you!" I said.

"Too surprised to refuse you," she laughed. "And well . . . it's all right isn't it? You're glad I didn't?"

I must say I should not like to be refused by any woman, least of all by my wife. It would have seemed such infernal impudence. "Well I rather hoped you'd snatch at me," I remarked. "There's the gong. I wonder if John is ready?"

"I am going to call him John too," she said, "he's

a perfect dear. What young eyes he has, what a good mouth! Oh, what a lucky lucky woman his wife will be!" She sighed a little.

"What are you growling about?" I asked.

"Don't be silly! I hope he will stay for ages."

"It seems quite mutual," I said, "Which of us would you think the younger?"

She opened her mouth quickly, then she said, "Oh. . . . *how* old is he?"

"Thirty-eight."

"So much!"

I pointed out how very grey his hair was.

"Yes," she agreed, and added, rather foolishly, I thought, "But so thick and crumply. He's a *darling.*"

At dinner a surprise awaited us. When Tommy came into the room, John jumped up. "Why it's Tommy—Tommy Smith!" he cried.

"Mr. Harris!" she gasped, her face lighting up.

They shook hands like old friends.

It turned out he had once stayed with the Smiths for a fortnight, and—so Tommy informed me later—had helped her no end in many ways. They spent most of the evening talking together, and a little project came into my mind. Why not make a match between them? Of course she was young enough to be his daughter in years, but in other ways she was old for her age, and it was not as ridiculous as it sounds. He would make a splendid

and devoted husband to the woman he loved, and love her devotedly and deeply I knew, and he was well off. Poor Tommy was alone in the world, or worse than alone, and depended upon her physical labour for her daily bread. He would always limp, but that did not make him an old crock, and it would not be long before he would be able to discard his crutch.

Later on I asked him about her people.

"Her father was all right, weak perhaps and a little disappointed and embittered; he was old and had rather given up the struggle I fancy, anyway everything fell on poor Tommy's shoulders from the time she was twelve years of age. That girl has never had any childhood; never known what youth really means."

"Isn't there a mother?" I asked.

John became reticent, "Yes, there's a mother."

"Does she drink?" I blurted out.

He smiled queerly, "She would never do anything so unbecoming to the complexion. She is just a woman who must have ease and luxury. . . . at any price. To get money to fling about—well, she won't stop at much."

"A bad 'un?" I asked.

John smoked for a few minutes in silence, and then he said with a cutting little laugh, "Oh no, a perfectly virtuous woman, therefore good. She cheats; gets goods so to speak without paying for

them. Oh she's good all right, but she's managed to do a damn sight more harm than the other sort. She's a thing without a soul or a drop of warm blood, incredibly selfish, a parasite, a vampire. She drained the old man and he died of it; then she started on the girl. Tommy knew her though, and didn't knock under. There was a young man who came after the girl, a decent young fellow, a little weak, but the mother got hold of him and ruined him. Poor Tommy!"

"The poor child," I said, "no wonder she looks so sad though her face lights up wonderfully." I felt I hated her loathsome mother with all my heart.

"Yes, but she learned her lessons early and she's a good-plucked one. She'll get over it. The lad is dead. He died bravely enough, God knows."

"Does Tommy know?"

"Yes, she knows."

I felt there was nothing too much I could do to make the poor child's life brighter. I would dig more and deeper, and I would certainly give her John for a husband. I should go very carefully to work, and not even to Gertrude would I mention my scheme. Women are such match-makers. Then they go so crudely to work; the subtleties are lost on them. No, I would manage the affair entirely myself without a soul guessing what I was up to.

Of course I asked Pam what she thought of my old school-fellow. I was disappointed when I found

she did not seem to want to discuss him, and had apparently given very little attention to him.

"Oh, not so dusty!" she said at length.

"Your mother raves about his eyes."

"What about them?" asked Pam.

"I suppose she thinks them handsome. She says they are so young—considering of course."

"I don't call thirty-eight awfully old," she returned wrinkling her brows. "Why shouldn't he have young eyes—for his age?"

"I thought you might like them too?" I said disappointedly.

"Oh me! I never notice things like that."

"Then his hair, of course it's very grey——"

"Only prematurely grey," said Pam quickly, "rather distinguished-looking I thought. What's wrong with his hair? He's *got* some all right." She glanced at mine.

"Your mother liked his hair too, what she called its 'crumply' look."

"Well I hardly noticed him, how could I take it all in like that?" she demanded carelessly. "I daresay he's all right."

I felt my face fall, "I did hope you would get fond of him," I said.

Pam went scarlet, "What a silly idea!"

"I hoped you might look on him as a sort of second father!" I sighed.

"Second father be—be jiggered," said Pam quite

hotly, "Well I shan't, so there! Good gracious what's that noise! Oh, of course it must be Cecil Burn again. Good biz!" She rushed off to see.

Of course it was Cecil Burn. He always arrived in a series of explosions of some sort or another. People exclaim at our spending five millions a day on the war and wonder where it all goes to. I don't wonder: I know.

I looked after her with dismay. The foolish child was so obviously infatuated with the disgusting youth. What was I to do? What was the best policy? Opposition? Where women were concerned opposition was fatal, and though Pam was my daughter and like me, yet she was a woman, and opposition would but make her the more determined to go her own way. Suddenly a deep plan occurred to me. I would not oppose, I would actually encourage the affair. I would sicken her of the ubiquitous youth. I would encourage his visits. I would talk of him all the time. I would laud him up to the skies. Then I would leave everything to the contrary nature of her sex and success would be mine. I put the plan in force there and then. I went up to young Burn and wrung his hand. He seemed surprised but prepared to take everything as it came. I begged he would stay for the rest of the day.

He said that was all right; he had come for the week-end.

I smiled, a sickly smile, and said that was better still.

John studied him with much curiosity but refrained from comment.

"What do you think of him?" I asked.

"He's all right," he said at length, "got the stuff in him under the surface."

"All right for Pam?" I asked bitterly.

John was too busy with his pipe to answer for a bit, then he said:

"That depends upon her, doesn't it?"

"She's infatuated," I said gloomily. "If you knew what it was to have an infatuated daughter you would not take it so indifferently I can tell you!"

"I suppose not," he said slowly.

I think perhaps he sympathised with me more than he would let it appear, for try as he would, his manner to Burn was not really genial. He seemed to have taken an instinctive dislike to him, and I'm sure I do not wonder. Old John can't throw dust in my eyes.

During the week-end, he and Tommy were much together, and my plans seemed going nicely. Pamela didn't seem so keen on young Burn either. She helped Tommy in the garden and made Cecil help too. John could not dig, but there were several things he was good at, and he did a lot for Tommy. Then Rupert came and dug in a silence new and

strange to him. Every now and then he glanced shyly at Tommy and she came and praised his work. Yes, the week-end promised well, there's no doubt about it. Women think they are good at this sort of thing because such matters are usually left to them. All I can say is, it takes a man to really make things hum. Women are too fond of meddling with the lives of the younger generation. Live and let live is my motto. If Pam did not want to have anything to say to Cecil Burn she should not have anything to say to him. If John and Tommy made up their minds they could not live apart, then as far as I was concerned they were at liberty to live together for the rest of their lives.

I was very careful that Gertrude should have no suspicions. If I went a little out of my way to throw dust in her eyes, well, the end—under certain circumstances—justifies the means.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW WIVES ARE SO UNTIDY

HEAVENS! The week I've had of it you wouldn't believe! First this beastly thing to correct and copy and hide away from my family. Rawson said that when one's family finds out you've got the vice they are never quite the same to you again. They are always hitting at authors and their "little ways." Personally, I think authors ought to be pitied, not blamed; they get all the kicks and none of the half-pence, for, of course, I shan't make a bally cent. out of this. It's a sheer work of philanthropy, and if it wasn't for proving Rawson all wrong, I'd chuck it. I simply haven't the time.

There's the office, the garden, the couples to be separated and united, Gertrude to be blinded, this stuff to get on with, the papers to be read, and really life is not long enough. It's slavery, that's what it is.

The Daylight Saving Bill put everything wrong, of course; that was what it was invented for. Anyone but a *British* Government would know that you

cannot make the sun out a liar; it's sheer profanity. To say that it is working comfortably all over the country is a gross mis-statement of fact. I have come to the opinion that an English Government can always make itself—if not others—believe what it likes. Naturally it prefers to believe in the comfortable thing. "Everything is all right," it says, soothingly, "couldn't be better. Just leave it to us."

The people who enthuse on the beastly thing—I am alluding, of course, to the Daylight Saving—are the people who are not affected by it. They just have their breakfast an hour later. *Their* problem is simple. It is very easy to be enthusiastic about something that looks well on paper and merely makes everybody else uncomfortable. To some the real state of bliss is not so much being in Heaven, as knowing others are in the Other Place.

Daylight Saving Bill indeed! Do the Government work an extra hour? Do they give up their hard-earned rest? Are they cheated into rising with the lark? No damn fear, and what I say is——

Of course Gertrude heard me and begged me not to. Call this a free country, and a man may not use a little mild language before his wife. Then *whose* wife can he use it before, I'd like to know? Women can never grasp the essentials of life; the only things that matter to them, are the

things that matter to nobody else. Things like spring cleaning, for instance.

Spring Cleaning! A most idiotic name! Any man could tell you it's actually spring dirtying. All the dust that has settled down quietly, and doesn't show and only asks to be left alone, germs and all, is stirred up. Everybody is choked and as far as possible infected. Instead of being under the carpet, it's on your furniture and in your food. There's nowhere to sleep and nothing to eat; nowhere even to sit down. The moment you try disaster comes. You are told to get out of the way; you are pushed here and there; you step in things you are warned to avoid; you—oh, confound it all! Doesn't every husband know what it means, and curses the day he became one?

"We must put things straight!" So like a woman! Does she put things straight? That's the last thing she does. She untidies and loses everything. Where are your comfortable old boots? Your dear old coat? Your favourite pipe? Spring-cleaned. You'll be lucky if you ever see them again.

It's not till the next spring cleaning comes round that you find your most treasured possessions, and then the cleaner sees to it that you lose them again instantly. Your treasured pipe is snatched away.

"So that's turned up! How funny—and how

filthy! I will just rub it up! How silly of you to have hidden it there, dear!"

It is rubbed up, and, as far as you are concerned, rubbed out of existence.

Well, I had got through the Spring Cleaning somehow. I had grown pale and I had lost weight, though Gertrude was too busy enjoying herself to notice the condition of a mere husband, but I had survived it. My old pipe had been less fortunate,. my pouch had gone and a host of other things. The things that had turned up had turned up in a truly awful condition. The rust had devoured my best club; the mice my favourite old coat.

"Of course if you will hide them in such places," Gertrude said, trying womanlike, to put the blame on the man. "If only you would go away for it!" she cried.

I was about the only thing she had not succeeded in losing and this want of complete success was her crumpled roseleaf. I put my foot down and kept it down:

"I shall not go away," I said, "I shall stay and hide things that I don't want lost or destroyed."

Gertrude sighed, "Oh Billy, you hide so beautifully, but you get cross because we cannot find them for you, and you know——"

"I know more than you suppose, Gertrude," I said darkly, and left the room.

The last word is the thing that counts in married

life whatever people may say, and I get it oftener than not.

Well, having the thing later made it worse if anything because I had come to the conclusion that Gertrude had forgotten all about it, and was carefully guarding my conversation so as not to remind her, and the shock when I found she was only postponing it was dreadful, but that was nothing to the Daylight Saving Bill.

If strenuous, my life has hitherto been orderly and fairly peaceful! now it became much more strenuous and much less orderly, while peace was nowhere.

At seven-thirty in the morning my tea is ready for me. Gertrude wakes me, I drink it, and in a minute or two I get up. Gertrude makes the tea because I cannot endure the stuff servants call by that name. She does not take it herself first thing because she limits her daily consumption of fluid with the idea of preserving what the French call *la ligne*. In English she does not want to get fat. I am always pointing out to her that at her age it is ridiculous to hope to preserve the slim outlines of youth, and that if she were to drink as much as she likes, and get fat if Fate decrees, it might be much better for her temper.

She always says the same thing: "Oh Billy you wouldn't like me if I was fat!"

"It wouldn't make any difference," I assure her.

What can make a difference after one has been married getting on for twenty years?

"All the same I don't think I'll risk it." She reminds me that Rupert would be annoyed. Mothers did not run to fat these days: it simply wasn't done.

So she does not join me in a cup of tea first thing. I sometimes think that but for making mine —and I like it made slowly and carefully—she would sleep on till it was time to make a hurried toilet for breakfast which we have at eight-fifteen, which would be even worse for *la ligne.*

When I get awake I swallow my tea as I was saying, and soon after I try and get hold of the bathroom. There is only one in the whole house—perfectly ridiculous, and every morning I decide to have another added, but forget all about it later on.

Would you believe it, I am almost always ten minutes too late or ten minutes too early, and either Pam or Rupert have got it—children have no respect for their fathers these days: their mothers won't let them.

If Rupert is in and I order him to come out at once, he only shouts back, "Shan't be a mo'. You're late!"

If it's Pam, she says:

"That you at last, Old Thing! Sit tight for a jiff." And I have to sit tight on the box outside, and scamp my bath, otherwise I would miss my breakfast. What a life! I rush my tea, rush my

bath, rush my breakfast, and rush off to the office. At nine-fifteen the brougham is waiting to take me to the junction where I catch the express. No matter what the weather, it may be freezing, snowing, hailing, blowing, or grizzling, into the brougham I step. I get to the office about ten, and hustle round I can tell you. If Brown had not everything ready for me to sign it simply could not be done, but somehow or other I do it. One-thirty luncheon at the Club with two old friends; lately I have included Rawson because he naturally likes to talk about my book.

After lunch a few minutes rest, a look through the papers, perhaps a hand of 'Bridge,' but off I have to fly soon after three, leaving those lucky devils with time to burn though they are no older than I. I don't get home as a rule till about five.

Gertrude has the whole day to do nothing in, and yet if I am a trifle before time, she will say how early the train is.

All that was bad enough by sun-time, though years at the treadmill gets one accustomed to the grind, but the new time—it hardly bears talking about! To be shouted at by one's wife at six-thirty and told the tea is ready and must be drunk at once. To be assured it is seven-thirty when one's brain clock knows it is an hour earlier! Off to the office at eight-thirty like a hustling American or a junior

clerk! And then, worst of all, when you *do* get home to be met with:

"Isn't it a lovely idea, Billy? Only four o'clock really, you know dearest. After tea you will be able to do an hour's work in the garden and then have only arrived at coming home time." That is a woman's logic.

Useless to point out that bedtime comes an hour earlier. She merely reminds you that you will never go to bed while it's light, so that you really *are* gaining a whole hour. Then it's so Providential with the garden in such a state.

"Come and look what Pam and I have done to-day."

It is no good saying you do not want to look, that you are quite ready to take her word for it. You are either urged or impelled or coaxed to the spot. Once there you are shown invisible progress and expected to go into raptures. No use declining to look; no use affecting to hunt; no use anything.

You are led up to it: "That's it. Isn't it splendid?"

Possibly I miss two familiar faces, more probably I don't. "You have each pulled up a weed" I say. "Splendid indeed!"

"Billy don't pretend. We did that whole patch."

I preferred it as it was, and say so. Before it ran riot perhaps, but now it looks moth-eaten which is worse. I don't want a moth-eaten garden. It

reminds me of bald heads, and that the last tonic was an infernal swindle.

I am led to a 'teeny weeny piece' that has been left for me—in case I should feel jealous. So teeny weeny if you are to believe them one can hardly see it. It won't take five minutes. Gertrude is somehow holding one of my hands; Pam the other.

"Nice Old Thing," says my daughter.

"Such a big brave strong man!" cooes my wife, "Such a bootiful Billy-illy."

"Gertrude" I say, "Don't be an ass!"

But Gertrude is not attending. She has got the hoe and is substituting it for her own hand. It may not be very exciting for a man to hold his own wife's hand, but it's a dashed sight more restful than holding a hoe. Pamela is also busy. In my other hand the spade is being skilfully insinuated. Thus, grossly over-burdened, am I led to the sacrifice.

It is all very well to have a devoted wife and daughter, two people so attached to one they will not go away and let you work alone; they prefer to watch you do it. Useless inventing errands, one or the other always remains. You are alternately coaxed, encouraged, and harried. You work because you are a soft-hearted idiot, and you also suspect that is really what your wife and family have got you for; your *raison d'être* in their life.

If you dropped work you would probably drop out altogether, become an absolute back number.

That's what the Daylight Saving Bill has meant to me. A greater hustle in the morning, longer hours in the office; longer hours working like a navvy in the beastly garden, and never anything to show for it. I assure you when I have finished no one would ever see the difference. A selfish or a lazy man wouldn't do it, but like the damned idiot I am I work at both ends of the day and expect no thanks for it.

On this occasion Pam has been left alone to encourage me. Of the two Pam is the more encouraging, but Gertrude is firmer. I prefer it should be Pam.

I rested on my spade for an instant and said:

"After a day's office worry and brain work it's really too much to——"

"Oh Dad, is the brain work as hard as this, and do you do as much of it?" she wanted to know. "No wonder you are tired before you begin."

"I have begun," I said. "I've just done that bit."

"*Which* bit?" She affected blindness. Pam can be aggravating at times; it is not her real nature, which is beautiful; it is the way Gertrude has brought her up.

John appeared. He announced he was going to cut the hedge just behind Pam.

I suggested he should cut the one in the kitchen-garden close to Tommy.

"We did that this morning," interrupted Pam, "didn't we, John?"

"Then you had better do it all over again," I said to him ignoring my daughter.

"There wouldn't be any hedge at all then," went on Pam, "in fact I expect you'll be pretty sick when you find out how little there is left of it as there is."

"You can help Tommy with the lettuces," I remarked to John, and he went reluctantly away.

As soon as he was out of earshot, the wretched ill-brought-up child said to me:

"Dad! Chuck it!"

I put down the spade and stretched myself.

She pushed it back into my weary hands, "I meant chuck—that!"

She pointed to the kitchen-garden.

"I don't know what you mean," I said angrily. "Mind your own business."

"I am," she said laconically, and she got up and left me.

I was extremely annoyed. The interfering little wretch! What did she suspect? What was it to her? And then deliberate story-telling. Call that minding her own business! The fact was Gertrude had not brought her up to be strictly truthful and I meant to tell her about it. I can't bear

even a white liar. Why are women such offenders in this way?

Well, as I sat there smoking and worrying Gertrude came out and caught me. "I thought Pam was here," she said wearily picking up the spade, "she promised me——"

"Gertrude," I said, "your daughter is not strictly truthful."

"She always tells *me* the truth," she answered rather defiantly.

"In that case I take it, it does not matter what she tells me, a mere father?"

Gertrude was silent.

"Does it or does it not?" I shouted.

"Oh Dad, what's happened?" It was Pam again, "I'd only gone for a sec. mums. Just to have a look at the lettuces. John wanted to cut the hedge, he's a nailer at cutting hedges, but Dad won't let him."

"Why won't you let him?" asked Gertrude turning on me.

"Because I won't," I said. She'd be wanting to know all my plans if I wasn't careful.

"I wish you wouldn't interfere Billy," she said crossly, "It never does any good."

"No," said Pam, "it doesn't. It makes people a jolly sight more determined, that's all."

"Nobody asked for your opinion, miss," I said severely.

"Then nobody's got it!" retorted my daughter.

Gertrude went into the house. I suppose she was ashamed to witness the result of her upbringing.

Pam was very fidgetty, "Those lettuces," she began, and got up to go.

"Stay where you are," I commanded. "I will not have it, I tell you."

Pam muttered something that sounded like 'lumping it.'

"You are not to interrupt them," I ordered.

"Interrupt who?"

"John and Tommy. They are old friends. They have a lot to talk about you cannot enter in. They don't want a third I expect."

She mumbled something about 'lumping a third'. "Tommy isn't that sort," she said at length, her face very pink, "Anyway it's very cruel of you pater, and bad for the garden. Do you want to stop Rupert digging? Don't you know he's fallen in love for the first time, and it's awfully serious——"

"Don't talk nonsense. Rupert in love—what next!"

"Would he dig just for a 'thank you' if he wasn't? Would anybody?"

"He's a child—seventeen."

"They mostly begin at seventeen," she said thoughtfully, "all mine did."

"All your what?" I demanded.

"Flutterers, Dad? Didn't you have any when you were young. I mean didn't you flutter?"

"Don't be absurd!" I said sharply. Really children now-a-days——!"

"Then you did! I can see it in your eye. I bet you fluttered 'some,' Old Thing!"

I was about to say something that would suppress her once and for all, when something exploded violently. "Zeppelins!" I gasped, and then I corrected myself, "Cecil Burn, of course!"

"No," said Pam with an assurance that rather troubled me, "it is not quite his noise. He does not do it like that. This must be a different one."

I picked up the hoe.

I was none too soon. Before I could say another word this fresh messenger from the W. O. was shot over the high hedge and right at me. I got a good swipe at him. While he was still in the air,—it was not till he came down that I swiped,—Pam said:

"Oh Dad, what dinky eyes he's got. I do hope he'll stay to dinner."

That hope added strength to my arm. I rushed at the young man again, "You blanked idiot, get out of this blanked garden, blank you!" and a bit more of the same sort of thing.

He was attired as every second youth its attired, as a second lieutenant. I concluded he was learn-

ing bombing, or perhaps teaching it. He had obviously dropped one in the road and blown himself over our hedge as a mere *jeu d'esprit*. That the War Office would have to buy more bombs, and might have had to pension his widow and children was of course nothing to him. No wonder a new loan has had to be floated.

"Sir——" he gasped as he started coming down. Then he paused and got a good look at Pam.

"Go away you—you blanketty nuisance you!" I shouted, and he went away—rather hurriedly. Where he went I neither know nor care, nor how he had come or why.

I wiped my hot face. That was a good thing settled anyhow.

"Oh Dad, how cruel!" cried Pam, "He might have come straight back from the Front, and mater said you were not to use language——"

"Be quiet, you undutiful child——"

"You're not a proper father to stay with. I shall go to John." She marched away with her head in the air.

Then Gertrude came out. She wanted to know what had happened. I told her and at some length, because otherwise she would have started me gardening again.

"Oh Billy dear, the poor boy!" Women are so sentimental.

"The place would be over-run with poor boys if you had your way! And their extravagance!"

"Let them be happy and careless while they can," she said rather sadly, "they will give a good account of themselves when the time comes to be serious. Sometimes theirs is such a brief little day! Ah Billy, a generation will have passed before the feet of youth come trooping down our lanes again! We shall not have too many of the young men with us when this war is over!"

So like Gertrude to make me feel uncomfortable and require to blow my nose, and do extravagant things! Rupert asked for his motor-bicycle that night, and he got it. Of course his mother put him on to asking me at the what-d'yer-call-it moment. Seventeen, a schoolboy, though he has left school, but seventeen has rather a way at leaping into eighteen—and even nineteen, these days.

"The first time I ever saw Dad use the hoe with what you might call energy," I heard my daughter explain to John, "Such a perfect pet, curly eyelashes and all, and now I shall never know anything about him."

I gave John the true version later. "Was it fair to your daughter?" he asked, "Youth to youth is the law; you must not bar it out of this garden. Miss Pam has plenty of decision of character. Trust her to choose for herself—and stick to her choice——"

"If she was your daughter you wouldn't talk like that——"

"But she is not my daughter," returned John, quite as if he were glad of it.

Then Gertrude came running in, a paper in her hand, "Billy what have you done? Pam recognised him at once. It was the young duke. Such an opportunity will never come again——"

"Not over my hedge, it won't," I returned firmly in a tone that closed the discussion.

CHAPTER IX

HOW WIVES ARE SUCH COWARDS

EVERY year there is a discussion which waxes fast and furious,—the question of where I am to go, and what I am to do, for my holiday. When I go for gout treatment I take Gertrude with me, pointing out that prevention is better than cure. I am not going to get up at unearthly hours by myself, or drink beastly waters by myself either. Even a modern wife owes a little duty and sympathy to her husband. I feel certain Rosaleen would not have tried all sorts of cowardly excuses to get out of it.

This year it was more difficult than usual for I did not see how I could leave my family. Now the War Office had got really busy, Pam would be in an absolutely unprotected state. Then there were John and Tommy, they were doing nicely under my fostering care, but was the plant hardy enough to do without it? I had my doubts. Mercifully Rupert realised nothing, and went on digging as I had never supposed he had it in him to dig; when he was not digging he was getting on or off his

motor-bicycle or repairing it. Rupert was the only one I felt really happy about. He was fully occupied.

The only thing I had quite decided upon was that Gertrude should come with me and have a holiday too. A friend who never goes away with his wife—I believe it is her doing—said:

"What an original idea, old man. You go away for a month together and make each other's acquaintance, eh?"

I did not condescend to answer the silly fool. Gertrude may not know much about me, but what I don't know of Gertrude, isn't worth knowing.

"I don't see how I can go after all," I said to her, "there's Pam——"

"There's John," she returned foolishly, "he will see to all that."

How blind women are! "How can John see to it?" I returned irritably, "He won't have time?" I meant him to be better occupied.

"All the same he will make time, I fancy," she went on in her persistent way.

I could say no more lest she should suspect my scheme and make a mess of it. I thought of young Burn for ever turning up, perhaps proposing to Pam. Then Togo had bitten the milkman, and it was only by repeated firmness I got the milk delivered at all. These youths are so fanciful and

timid. No, I really could not leave this year, and said so.

Gertrude's face fell. I suppose she had been looking forward to a holiday.

"I thought you might have liked a bachelor one, this year," she said.

I frowned. All very well for Gertrude to talk like that. "No, I have decided to take you," I said.

"Very well," she returned, not very gratefully, "are you taking me for your gout cure? Why not Harrogate this year? The hotel is comfortable and it's a rest from housekeeping worries."

Gertrude is for ever talking about household cares as if they are the curse of a woman's existence, just because a servant or so has gone into munitions and we can't get others. She tried 'lady-helps,' but found them neither. Not a very nice and grateful way to talk. But for me she would probably have had no house at all, just been a spinster in a Boarding Establishment. She does not seem to realise her extraordinary good fortune in the least, and when I point it out, she shuts me up by saying:

"There's always something."

"Slaving in the garden has cured my gout," I returned, "if I went anywhere it would be for the fishing."

"With a friend—*en garçon*. That is the most

enjoyable holiday of all!" she exclaimed, and added, "Isn't it?"

"None of them can come this year," I returned.

"Fishing would be nicer than you having gout," she said thoughtfully, "more restful, I mean," and added, "You would go somewhere where you'd be sure of catching fish of course?"

"Don't be foolish, my dear," I returned patiently. Many modern women are sportsmen, but needless to say Gertrude was not, or she would not have made such an ignorant remark.

"There was the golfing holiday you used to take with Mr. Pilling," she said suddenly, "Oh Billy, I simply loved that! It did us both so much good."

"Thanks to your friend, the Vicar," I returned with some bitterness, "Pilling dare not show his face on any links. The poor fellow's life is utterly spoiled. He's given a lifetime to getting down to three, when he starts again it will be at eighteen. He says he knows it for a fact."

"But dearest, you know you are not particular, and even you said you were startled——"

"More likely envious," I corrected.

"But before ladies and Miss de Vere Jones of all people——"

"If people will hang round listening——"

"You said they ran away with their fingers in their ears——"

"They took care to listen first," I retorted. "Oh

Eve, Eve! Putting the blame on the man as usual."

"Billy, your memory is at fault, it was Eve who——"

"Never rested till she set her husband digging and weeding," I got in. "Her name should have been Gertrude."

My wife leaned back in a tired fashion, "Very well, but we were discussing your holiday——"

"*Our* holiday," I corrected.

"Where is this fishing you have taken?"

"How did you guess I had taken it?"

"Is there a good hotel close?"

"No darling," I replied, "there is—er—nothing close, but the fish leap out of the waters at you."

"They will be required to," she said crossly. "What are we to live in while the fish leap. A caravan?"

"Don't try and be sarcastic Gertrude. It does not suit you. I have taken a cottage. The river is only a minute away."

"What sort of a cottage?"

"How should I know."

"Anything in the way of service or shops?"

"Gertrude you have become over-civilised, luxurious and lazy. What's wrong with the simple life?"

"Everything," she said, and got up and left me. There's no pleasing some women. Here was I content to do without servants and shops for a month,

and Gertrude wanting to find a Savoy planted in the Wilderness.

I followed her into the house. "We will do our own work for a month," I said, "it will be fun."

"For whom?"

"We shall return to Nature; to 'Love in a Cottage'." I put my arm round her waist.

She pushed me away, and reminded me that she and Pam had had 'to work like niggers' to keep the house going, and she wanted a rest. How ready women are to talk about 'working like niggers,' and how aptly they express themselves. I have seen niggers work.

"With a little management housework is a trifle," I went on, "and in a tiny place there's nothing to be done."

"Aren't we going to eat? So it's tiny? Will there be anywhere to sleep?"

"There are two bedrooms and a living-room."

"Oh! Any furniture?"

"Don't be absurd. There'll be lots of furniture of course. In America, household work is more fun than anything——"

"Oh, is the cottage in America?"

"Gertrude this is not like you. Aren't you well? What is wrong?"

"Nothing. I was only wondering which part of the household work you intend undertaking?"

"Why dear, I shall catch the fish for you to cook!" I exclaimed astonished at her denseness. In the good old days it was enough, and more than enough, that man should be a provider. In his leisure moments he could occupy himself clumping his neighbour—or his wife—over the head. Now he is expected to be a sort of Whiteleys, everything in one. If he as much as pushes his wife he finds himself in the police court, and how much better women would be for drastic measures now and then. Really they have got totally out of hand. If he wanders by cliffs and gets pushed over his reputation is gone for life. Lord of Creation indeed! Of all the bitter ironies! Still it was no good losing my temper with Gertrude. She was easy-going and placid as a rule, but when she did explode—and it was always about nothing—well, she *did* explode. At such times I tried other methods. Among the essentials of a husband's make-up are infinite tact and patience, and perhaps a little soft sawder.

"It'll be jolly us two being alone together there," I said edging closer, "Like another honeymoon and all."

I remembered when I had said it that I had spent my honeymoon secretly longing for Rosaleen and grieving over our parting, and that, from my own point of view, it had not been a success. Of course for Gertrude it was all right.

"One honeymoon's enough for me, thank you," said my wife edging away, "I often wonder how I got through it. If there hadn't been the new name to fall back on——"

I was shocked. That was neither a wifely nor womanly way to talk. It was the happiest time of her life—or should have been.

"Of course if you look on it like that," I began deeply hurt, "perhaps it's just as well we only have a honeymoon once."

"That's the whole trouble," said Gertrude, who was in a new strange mood I could not follow, "We ought all to have a honeymoon, each year—with a different person."

I was speechless. 'Every woman is at heart a rake.' I had not really believed it, and certainly I had never believed it of Gertrude. For nineteen years I had supposed her all a nice woman should be, and now this! She was a profligate, female rake, Don Juan——

"Well, I mean it," she went on defiantly, "it's no good looking like that, Billy. Think what it would mean! Every year to have a *thorough* change. To be with somebody whose every thought and word you did not know beforehand, with somebody whose limitations you had not yet reached——"

"Does this tirade mean you wish to change me, Gertrude?" I asked in accents that should have warned her.

"Not permanently dear," she said quickly, "only to have a change sometimes. Every married woman feels like that at times, only we're such cramped conventional little souls, we will not own it even to ourselves——"

"And what is the deserted husband to do in the meanwhile? The housework?" I asked sarcastically.

"Why he'd be with his, of course, and they'd both meet after a proper holiday——"

"Improper holiday I should call it! And discuss their experiences?" I enquired, growing sardonic.

"Well, matrimony would be shorn of half its terrors if there was always a new topic of conversation, something fresh to discuss——"

"This hankering after depravity," I began.

"It is not depravity," she declared, "It's just hankering after something fresh and new, a glimmer of youth again, a little glamour. If the Government brought in a Bill making it law there would be no end of a rush on it. I *know*!"

"Hold your tongue, Gertrude," I commanded, "this is sheer wantonness."

My disgust was too deep for words. This was the wife I had cherished in my bosom; the woman I thought I knew through and through. A woman who acknowledged wanting a change, a guilty change, from me. A man might well desire a change seeing the monotony of woman and his life,

but that a woman should dare to look over the wall! Outrageous! Certainly if such a law was in existence Rosaleen and I need not have grieved so much over our terrible parting; there would have been the yearly holiday and reunion to look forward to, but that was a very different thing from a man's wife going off on the loose. One was romance, bliss; the other the depths of depravity.

I grabbed her arm, "Gertrude answer me at once. Where is the Vicar going for his holiday this year?"

"I don't know," she prevaricated. "You are hurting my arm."

"There is one slight objection to this plan of yours," I observed, "to say nothing of others I prefer to ignore. A man could get somebody to join his holiday as long as he had one foot out of the grave, but after the first it would be difficult for a woman, and later on impossible."

Gertrude put her chin in the air, "She could *try* anyway; she's not even allowed to do that now."

"I have fixed Friday for our departure," I said coldly.

"As good a day to start as any other considering," she said a little sulkily, "If the other plan came in people would only go with people because they wanted to, and people would ask them nicely."

"Your little plan is not coming in, my dear,"

I said very firmly indeed, "You may make up your mind to *that.*"

"If there was an hotel it would not have mattered so much. There would be somebody for me to speak to all the day."

"Seemingly I do not count. I shall be there for you to speak to when I am not fishing."

"You will be there for me to speak to when you've caught some," she returned, "and that means we'll both me mum half the time." She stamped her foot, "It'll be a beastly holiday, I *know* it!"

I feel sure that this determination of Gertrude prevented our holiday being the real success it would have been otherwise. Before I left I took John aside:

"Promise you won't let anyone propose to Pam," I said.

He seemed upset at the responsibility and begged me to let him off, but I was adamant. It was a reluctant consent I wrung from him, but I got it out of him at last. "Just fancy yourself her father —her deputy father—and it will be easy enough."

"But I can't fancy it," he said almost wildly.

"I'm going to be boxed up with Gertrude for a month," I went on, "not a soul to speak to, and I could not bear it unless I knew I had you to rely on."

"Well. . . . I'll do my best," he said at length. "What an ideal holiday! Just the two of you!"

"An ideal holiday isn't *any* two," I said coldly, "it's the right two."

And I still maintain that for the right two that holiday would have been ideal. Away from everybody and everything! Roses growing up to the thatch. Not much furniture perhaps, but a chair apiece to sit on, a table to sit at; two beds to sleep on.

I forgot to say that before I tore myself away from home I told John as an encouragement, that Pam looked on him quite as a second father; she had practically owned it to me. Then I had a few last words with Pam.

"Remember," I warned her, "before you do anything rash you are to ask John's permission."

She made a face, "And if he won't let me do anything rash, or do it himself, what then?"

"Then you are to do without doing it," I said sternly.

"Search me!" she replied.

"You must think of him as your guardian," I went on. I was determined to leave things all right behind me at any rate.

"He rubs his thirty-eight in quite enough as it is without any old guardianing," she returned. "I believe he thinks of me as a sort of baby. I'll show him, that's all. It won't be the first time a baby's beaten a grown-up. You've only got to yowl hard enough and they always give it you in the end."

It was trying to have to leave things like this, only to find what we did at the other end. No service; no fires; no anything, and such poky bare little rooms. A carrier came twice a week and there was a boy who left milk, but for that we might as well have been on a desert island. We had not been there an hour before Gertrude sent me to the well to draw some water—a nice sort of job for a man on his holiday!

"I thought I was coming for rest after mental and physical overwork," I said, "It's disgraceful that there's no water laid on."

She said she could not cook without it, and then added there was nothing to cook. Perhaps I had better go and catch some fish at once.

I like to sit down after a journey and said so, but women never listen to reason. If there were no fish there would be no dinner. I could choose myself; it did not matter to her. A boiled egg and a bit of cheese would suit her all right.

It wouldn't suit me and I let her know it.

"It's got to suit you unless there's fish," she said.

I got out my tackle. Upstairs there were two tiny single rooms and a wide flat thing we supposed was meant to represent a bath. Gertrude had got her things into the biggest room before I had realised her intention, and unpacked mine in the other. She said I must have my bath in the morning and she would have hers at night. I should be

required to draw the water for both and carry it up and downstairs. A nice prospect for the father of a family! Why couldn't Gertrude go without her bath? But no, she never considered me. I was a mere cipher, a bondslave. How different it all would be with Rosaleen!

"Aren't you going to start, Billy? You know you never sleep if dinner is too late."

Hustle! Hustle! Hustle! And call it a holiday! I took my rod and departed, not too pleased at the turn Fate had taken. When I got to the river however I felt more hopeful. The fish really were leaping at you in the most eager fashion, literally praying to be caught. They could not have prayed hard enough, or have leapt far enough. Eventually I turned empty away.

I told Gertrude that the wind had been in the wrong direction, that a beastly cow had mooed at the critical moment, and a donkey brayed.

She said if I didn't mind, she didn't. She had not counted on the fish, and had done something with eggs and cheese. I suppose it was better than nothing. All the same if a man's been brought away to be starved. . . .

It was very still in the little living-room. Gertrude went to bed early. She said she was tired out. I had to drag up the infernal bathwater.

I wasn't late going to bed myself. I was just getting between the sheets when I heard a shriek

from the next room. I knew what it was of course. Gertrude had found a mouse or a rat, in or under, the bed. She shrieked again, an angry shriek, and I thought I had better go. After all it would have been pretty awkward under the circumstances if anything had happened to Gertrude.

It was not a mouse or a rat: it was the bath. She said nobody could empty the beastly thing.

"But you have done it," I said looking at the empty bath.

She pointed to herself and the floor, and then I saw what she meant. Her dressing-gown and nightdress were soaked; the carpet wringing.

It was the first time I had felt like smiling. I laughed; the more I thought of it the more I laughed. Gertrude did not laugh. Women have no sense of humour. She asked me to go away.

In the morning I determined to prove how a bath could be managed. I fetched it out of Gertrude's room, and she watched me with interest. Then she went down and saw to the fire and breakfast. She had made my tea on the spirit kettle.

"A man always knows, doesn't he?" she said. "He can always bale it out with the soap dish."

I took my oath I would do nothing so laborious and so futile. I finished dressing, then I looked at the bath which I had filled liberally. It took a very wide stretch, I found, and the water would not stay quiet for an instant. However my idea was to

swirl it round and then swing it into the bucket. I still think there was nothing wrong with the idea. It just didn't work, that is all. It swung out before I was quite prepared. Gertrude had had hysterics over nothing. I merely said a word or two. Then I changed all my things, left them for Gertrude to dry, and went calmly down to breakfast.

She asked me why I was wearing that suit.

I said because I preferred to wear it.

She reminded me that I had always hated it.

I said that changing one's mind had long ceased to be the sole prerogative of the fair sex.

"Did you empty the bath water after you were dressed or before?" she asked suddenly.

I happened to have my mouth full and was unable to answer. She ran up to my room, and when she came down was giggling in a most silly manner. She said she knew it would come to the soap-dish.

I said not on my side. I had made up my mind to win, and she said she had done exactly the same. Should we have a bet on it and see who won first? We made the bet, and that day started better.

The carrier came and Gertrude took in a huge supply of stores.

I pointed out that she would not want all that stuff with the fish.

"No, but I shall want it without the fish," she replied idiotically.

I kept my patience, "I thought I had explained that I had come here to catch fish, my dear."

"But you did not explain if the fish were in the conspiracy."

They were not in the conspiracy that day as it happened. I told Gertrude the right flies had not come. She said she thought it would be the flies.

The next day it was Gertrude who ruined everything. I was just about to get a nibble, two pounds if an ounce, when Gertrude rushed up to me, clutched me, and said hysterically;

"Oh Billy, a fierce cow in the garden! Eating things!"

"Don't be a damned idiot!" I said a little sharply. I pointed out that she had lost me the four-pounder I was just landing.

She went on clutching. "Billy, it bellowed: then it chased me."

"You coward," I said, "Go away. Don't you know they are much more frightened of you, than you are of them."

"This one wasn't."

"You didn't wait to see."

"If I had waited to see I should be gored."

"No such luck!" I muttered thinking of the six pounder she had knocked off the bank back into the water. Unfortunately she heard me.

She began to cry, "Do you think I don't know you only proposed to me in a temper?"

"A cow," I replied, "the quietest creature on earth. Mild as milk."

"Serve you right getting accepted? If you cared tuppence about me you would drive it away."

"There's no hurry," I said, "I want to get that big fellow again——"

"Oh very well, only the dinner is burning——"

No good arguing with an unreasonable woman. I got up and went.

"She pushed me out and shut herself inside the gate," Gertrude called after me, "You had better look out. If her calf has been taken away she may be dangerous."

"Don't be so silly!" I shouted back.

I found matters much as Gertrude had stated. The cow certainly was inside the garden. She was up against the gate in such a position that nobody could get in. She was eating the hedges, the peas, and various garments hanging out to dry.

Get inside I could not. Push her away I could not. I thumped and she only looked at me with her mild eyes in a benign sort of way and never budged.

I hurried back to Gertrude.

"Then she chased you too," she said looking at my hot face, and quite as if she hoped it, "and you ran, Billy!"

"The cow hasn't been invented that could make me run," I said scornfully, and explained how mat-

ters really stood. "We shall have to entice her out of the garden. What about a turnip——"

"If it's all the same to you," she returned, "I will leave the enticing part to you. Perhaps a man is better at it."

"You wretched little coward!"

"Coward yourself," exclaimed my wife hotly, "wait till she goes for you!"

"I shall certainly not cut and run," I retorted.

"Won't you! Wait till she starts, that's all!"

The brute started there and then. I think it was the sight of Gertrude that upset her. An extraordinary change came over the creature; the lamb became a roaring lion. One bellow and she had burst through the gate at us.

I had a very narrow escape myself: Gertrude's was even narrower. I had to open the gate again to drag her through behind me, and I was only just in time.

"I told you so!" she gasped. Just like a woman!

"You goaded her to it," I said. "She seemed quite fond of me."

"Well, at least I must thank you for saving my husband's life," she said in a nasty voice. She marched into the house, a regular Johnny-head-in-air.

I followed, "My dear child," I began.

She pushed me away, "Dear child yourself!" she

returned crossly, "I'm old enough to be your mother and you know it!" She went out banging the door behind her.

There was nothing worth eating for dinner. That six pounder that Gertrude had lost would have saved the situation, but little she cared about that. Neither of us made any comments upon the dinner or upon anything else. We sat in silence in the miserable little living-room. It might be Gertrude's ideal of the simple life; it certainly was not mine. It was the last time I got let in for it either.

At ten Gertrude got up without a word and banged her door.

At ten thirty I did precisely the same. On my way upstairs I met her bath-water rushing down. I let it rush.

People only talk about the simple life and love in a cottage because they have never tried them, and never will. They are not things that can be talked about at all once one has experienced either. Even poor old Pilling would hardly be able to do them justice.

Of course if Rosaleen had been my companion that would have been a very different matter. Thanks to my tact and patience I had never let Gertrude quarrel with me during the nineteen years of our marriage, but we came very near it in that beastly little pig-stye. There wasn't room to swing

a cat. One slid off the horse-hair chairs, and lay on nubbles all night. This was what women ironically called rest and pleasure! How thankful I would be when the month was up; how difficult to endure till release came!

With Rosaleen it would have been bliss, not endurance at all. Like two birds on a twig we'd have been, happy as happy in our cosy little nest! Ah Rosaleen, my dark Rosaleen, the undying passion of my youth; the longing and despair of my manhood! Never never to be forgotten come what may: never never to cease to be regretted!

Unfortunately I was having my daily struggle with the bath when these bitter-sweet memories overwhelmed me, and the swirl shot up into the air, likewise overwhelmed me, and then vanished in my bed. I cursed it and forgot the trials of the past in the trials of the present.

When I stooped to kiss Gertrude who was sitting at the breakfast table, she just jabbed her forehead at me. "Why go on pretending?" she asked, "I can't keep it up any longer. I know you hate me." She burst into tears.

I realised she had got out of bed the wrong way. I felt rather upset. I might love and regret Rosaleen, but it was Gertrude I had lived with for nineteen years, Gertrude who was the mother of the children, especially Pam, and after all that has to go for something. It took me a long time to con-

sole her and put things right, and all the time the bacon and eggs were getting cold. It's in those little ways that a woman is so thoughtless. Now Rosaleen would have seen I had my breakfast hot first and only have needed consoling after. However Gertrude is sensible enough once she thinks about it, and must have realised how absurd it is for a woman of her age to go on like that, for she apologised and said she did not really mean it, and heated up the bacon and eggs. Then I told her where I had left the bath-water and we both laughed.

Laughter is the finest matrimonial tonic possible, I find.

There were a large batch of letters for both of us, and I pounced on mine from Pam. What had my little girl to say to me? What an age it seemed since I had looked at her pretty face! What had the young monkey been up to in my absence? However we can only be young once, and it was only her high spirits. How were John and Tommy getting on? Had he slacked off when I was not there to keep him up to it?

"Well, dear Old Thing," she began, "how's my Dad? The mater says fishing is no earthly up to date, but I hope, for both your sakes, prospects have cleared lately. What a lovely time you and the mater must be having all on your lonely onelys, and how is the poor mater bearing up? Tell her to cheero, we often think of her, and mention her

in our prayers. Tommy is still going it in the garden, which is looking A. 1. . .Cecil comes over most days. Rupert, poor dear, does not guess and still goes on digging. What a good thing one can't undig, for that's what he'll be wanting to do before long, I bet. John is a nailer for slugging and not nearly so lame. Just fancy he has bought Haighlands which I wanted! Isn't it a funny coincidence?"

Pam little guessed how pleased I was to find Tommy's name so unconsciously coupled with John's. She digging; he slugging. What could be better? So he had taken the Haighlands. Pam was obviously pleased; she would be able to be there as much as she liked. . . . I went on with the letter. The next information was less pleasing.

"Togo has bitten the aunt by marriage of the doctor's sister-in-law. Doesn't it sound just like a French exercise? The doctor is awfully ratty, and talks about an action, and the constable has been up to see you and had to have two drinks and a sovereign before he would go away. The doctor has no expectations and has to go miles out of his way to attend to her, and she abuses him all the time, and misunderstands Togo's affection for him."

I sighed. How things went to pieces when the ever-watchful eye of the master was absent!

"Cecil has a W. O. cousin who drops in now and then," the letter went on, causing me to turn pale

and fear the worst, "Such a precious! And the cousin *of* the cousin, a naval lieutenant,—such a lovely man!—is teaching me to ride a motor bicycle. Brothers are such beasts. Rupert will only teach Tommy and let her ride behind, and Cecil isn't much use either, but the cousin of the cousin is fairly IT. Such fun! It is all on the cheap too—W.O. machine, W.O. petrol."

I gave a prodigious sigh. If this was bad, almost worse was to follow.

"Mrs. Smith has come to live with poor Tommy. I don't like her and I don't think Tommy does either, but the woman says she's her mother so what are you to do? She's not bad-looking in her way, but over-dressed, out of Tommy's money, and very 'got up.' Not kept her complexion by soap and water. Do you think you can make her hook it, Dad?"

I did not think: I knew. She should go out, and instantly. I said as much to Gertrude. "Everything goes wrong when one is away," I added.

"Oh Billy, would you think me awfully selfish if I ask you to give up the rest of your holiday and take me home?"

"It would be a wrench," I owned, "and of course it hardly seems the thing to leave a river choc-a-block of fish like that, but is it right for us just to think of our own pleasure and idle indulgencies? Haven't we our duty to the children, to our home?"

"I almost feel as if we ought to try and make up our minds to it."

"Then we will, Gertrude," I said, "and we won't hesitate lest we change our minds. We will go to-morrow."

"I will send a wire by the milk-boy."

"No," I laughed, "let's give them a pleasant surprise," and Gertrude went up to do the packing. I caught a fish that afternoon and could not but feel it hard to leave at such a time. Still duty is duty. It was not a very big fish.

We had furnished the little lodge for Tommy: we had not given it to Tommy's unspeakable mother. The sooner we got home the better. The woman should not spoil the poor child's life for the second time. I had never been more determined about anything than that she should go. Gertrude should go straight to the lodge and give her notice or whatever was the correct thing.

As we proceeded home I felt myself grow younger. Gertrude slipped her arm through mine, "If your holiday was at all disappointing through any fault of mine, I'm sorry," she said in a charming way she has. I told her that I was quite as much to blame as she was, possibly more. I think it was the thought that soon I should be in my comfortable home, looking on Pam's dear face, that filled me with such a sense of well-being.

We sent the luggage round to the back and slipped in by the side gate.

Now for the pleasant surprise!

I stole into the garden. Tommy was digging, Rupert and Cecil Burn were digging also, and the garden was looking splendid. Not far away John and Pam were hunting for slugs.

I crept up to them. They were too busy hunting for the same slug at the same time to see me. I succeeded in giving them the pleasant surprise. I said:

"Boo!"

They jumped as if they had been shot, and both faces went scarlet with delight.

I embraced Pam, and shook John's hand, and still they went on gasping.

"You're not due back yet surely," said Pam, and added hurriedly, "John's such a nailer at slugging."

"So I see!" I said beaming.

Pam ran off to see her mother, and I turned to John, "Well, was it very difficult?" I asked.

"It was."

"Anybody been making love to her in my absence —the scoundrel!"

John gave a nervous start, and then he said "Nobody has proposed to her. . . . yet."

"That's all right then," I returned briskly, "I don't mind telling you straight I have had my sus-

picions and been most uneasy, most uneasy, and I have given up my holiday to stop it."

"Indeed," said John.

"Pam would never go against my express wish," I went on, "you know that quite well."

"Perhaps I do, but she might get round you . . . . if . . . . if there was anybody——"

He stopped abruptly.

"She will not get round me on that matter," I returned curtly. "What's this I hear about Mrs. Smith?"

"She's come. Got some game of course; must scent a fool and his money, I suppose."

I was worried. 'A fool and his money.' There was John rich and single. She had spoiled one affair for Tommy, now she had come to spoil this. Fortunately she had to get the better of me first.

"She's come and soon she will be gone," I said.

"I hope so."

"You may count on it. I am taking it in hand myself."

"That's good," he returned, "And how did your fishing go off?"

"The last day was even better than the others," I returned, and hurried off to greet the rest.

When I saw Pam alone, she said:

"Dad make that Mrs. Smith go. She's tracking Cecil and John."

I had no objection to her tracking Cecil and

nearly said so. I saw now why Pam wanted her sent away. The sly little puss! She was afraid the fascinations of the woman of the world would be too much for her young man!

I pinched her ear, "Count her gone," I returned.

"I will," she returned with a thankful sigh. "What a clever Dad!"

I determined not to let the grass grow under my feet. That very night I tackled Gertrude.

"You will go to the lodge first thing tomorrow," I said, "ask for Mrs. Smith, use tact, but well," and I laughed, "let her see that it's a plain case of push and go."

Gertrude did not seem to see my little joke. She was very queer altogether. She clenched her hand and her teeth and said:

"I will not interfere. The worst can happen, but I will have no hand in it."

"Really Gertrude, you need not try to look like a tragedy queen," I said justly incensed.

I could see that stung, though she did not answer.

"All this fuss over a strange woman. As the mistress of the house, it's your job to send her off."

"As the master of the house and the outside premises, I consider it yours."

"Then you are out of your reckoning for once. Do you know what she is?"

"I can guess."

"And you'd encourage her to stay and break up everything?" I enquired.

"I shall not interfere. There are things the man must do and that is one of them."

"You refuse to do your duty?"

"I do." Gertrude can set her mouth in a very unpleasant way.

"Or obey my commands?"

"In this instance."

"Then I have nothing more to say," I said sternly, and pointed out to her how badly she was behaving, and a few other things. Would you believe me it made no difference? She was in one of her unreasonable and dogged moods. She said I could send Mrs. Smith away. The fact was she was afraid of the job. Women are moral as well as physical cowards it seems to me. Gertrude was certainly a modern in more ways than one. Her husband's wishes were very far from being her law. She did not care a damn it seemed to me what he wished or didn't wish. She wasn't going to do anything she fancied might be awkward or unpleasant. No damn fear! She would shunt that on to the man who had her living to earn by the sweat of his brow and a dozen things to see to. Rosaleen would not have said No. She would have thrust the viper from the hearth in an instant. If only it could have been Rosaleen! Or if a man might shake his wife, but Gertrude would not adapt herself very easily to

shaking. If I had my time over again and I could not get Rosaleen, I should marry a little woman. It's best when all's said and done.

"I shall go Myself and interview Mrs. Smith," I said coldly. "I shall go Myself directly after breakfast tomorrow. She'll be gone by night."

"I hope so, I'm sure," returned my wife.

Some people feel more full of beans at night, some in the morning. Night has always been my best time. The journey had shaken me considerably and I woke very much off colour next morning. I expected Gertrude to see it and act accordingly. She seemed too dense to see anything.

As soon as I had finished breakfast, she said "At last!" Then she reminded me that I was going to see Mrs. Smith at once. Just like a woman. No time to think, to prepare your subject as it were. Act on impulse! Do everything in a rush!

I pointed out that I must know what to say to Mrs. Smith before I said it, and hang it all!—however I said it, it was a pretty beastly sort of thing for a poor man to have to say to a woman. To turn her out into the road! However, Pam and John came and hung round, and there you are. Of course I was anxious to get the business over myself.

I said I thought I might as well start. Gertrude, who seemed all on wires, said it would be time for

lunch if I didn't. Eventually I started, and eventually I got there.

I rang the bell in a devil-may-care fashion to show her she could not play any tricks with me. Then I whistled a jolly tune on the doorstep. I knew of course she would have to open the door to me herself, and wished to goodness she would get it over. Instead she kept me for ages. She was obviously tittervating with the idea of getting round me—me of all men—! and I got mad as a hatter cooling my heels there. The cheek of the woman!

At last there came the clatter of very high heels, and the door was opened. I stepped forward. "Mrs. Smith?" I began.

Then a most extraordinary thing happened. It was not Tommy's Mrs. Smith at all. It was Rosaleen.

CHAPTER X

HOW WIVES MAKE EXPLANATIONS VERY DIFFICULT

I READ somewhere once that a joy too violent was more like a violent pain than anything else. I remember thinking what rot it was. How could joy be anything but joy, pain anything but pain? When Rosaleen popped out at me like that I realised what the writer had meant, and agreed with him. It was a sort of shock-joy if you know what I mean. I was awfully glad, of course, to see her rising out of the past like that, and then again I was more flabbergasted than anything.

If any of you who read this—and surely you won't give it up half way!—have found a past suddenly becoming a present, you will know what I mean, and feel for me in every way. If you have never had a past or never found it a present, you will wonder what the dickens I am making such a to-do about. You will wonder because you do not know, and cannot understand. It is the limitations of one's readers that makes writing such a difficulty.

How can I make it plain to you limited ones? Well suppose this: that you—man or woman as the case may be—fell in love when you were young and married her. She died and you buried her; of course husbands get buried as much as wives, but I am speaking allegorically. Well, he or she is dead, isn't she, and there you are! It's not your fault and it can't be helped; you've just got to make the best of it and think how much worse it might have been. After a bit—sometimes it's a long bit and sometimes it's a very little one—you fall in love again. You marry and settle down very happily. You live in the present not the past—unless you are a fool. So far, so good. Now comes the tug of war! The first appears, she or he is not dead, has no intention of being dead either; she claims you; says, "Do you remember?" or something of the sort. Well, what are you to do about it? Of course you're very pleased to see her, but there's the other one too. You had got settled down with the other and were quite happy and comfortable. A middle-aged man wants to be comfortable first of all. The first arising like this long after she is decently forgotten isn't comfortable; it's upsetting. Mind you all the time the fellow is frightfully pleased about it, he thinks it no end romantic and all that, and that she isn't so much changed—considering, but he's fifty, and he has to think of the second one; he can't just think of himself. It's like

opening some dainty ware and finding it's a jack-in-the-box and it's got you in the eye first go.

It's not exactly funny, is it? Here's this long-forgotten trifling flirtation hanging round your neck, and you in a fuss lest anyone shall come and see her hanging, and misunderstand. She always used to let me kiss her whenever I wanted to when we were silly children, but it's rather different twenty years later when you don't want to—at least of course you want to, but it wouldn't be fair to the other. You've given every thought to the other for twenty years, and feel it your duty to continue to do so.

"Oh Billy, just the same, not a day older!"

"I feel twenty years older," I said placing her in a chair, "quite twenty, Mrs. Smith."

"Mrs. Smith! Oh *Billy!*" She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "When I suspected it might be you I came at once. I knew you would never forgive me for staying away."

"Not at all."

"What a surprise for you!" she laughed, "Not a horrid one, I hope?"

"No, no, charmed," I cried hurriedly. I only wanted to get a little accustomed to the idea, "My wife will be delighted to call on you," I added.

She laughed more than ever, "You married Gertrude Bluggins in the end, didn't you?"

"I had that honour," I returned rather formally. The longer the interview lasted, and it lasted some

time, the queerer and more muddled I got to feel. She remembered things I had completely forgotten. She spoke of a harrowing parting and countless other buried incidents. "Let the dead past bury its dead," I suggested.

She shook her head, "Ah, memories that bless and burn," she sighed, "how true that is! Yet they were sweet too." She went on to say that the long years between had hardly counted in her life. Only then and now counted with her. She had been faithful unto death,—or rather after marriage. She added, "But I know you understand?"

"Quite so," I agreed, "quite so!" I picked up my hat.

She seized it playfully from me, she had the same kittenish ways after twenty years, and she was only two years my senior. She made me think of that picture called "Dignity and Impudence." Gertrude is a very dignified, even regal, woman. Mrs. Smith was not.

"No, no, we have not begun our little talk yet."

"I must not be late for lunch," I returned.

"Ah poor boy, he will be scolded if he is late. Ah Billy, how different——"

"Not at all," I corrected her, "naturally I am master in my own house, but there are soles, and I like them smoking."

She went on to say what a ghastly mistake it had all been, how I had misunderstood, been too hasty,

and in a fit of pique. . . . and women who'd been waiting and hoping for it so ready to take advantage of a boy in trouble, especially a boy so much younger——

"On the contrary," I began.

"Hush! Your courage is magnificent, but I can see the wound. Both our lives spoiled!"

That seemed to me taking rather a pessimistic view of it and I said something of the sort. She did not take much notice.

"The irony of things," she exclaimed bitterly, "I, a widow, free, and you——"

"No, I'm not," I said a little bluntly. I did not even want to be. Presents were easier to live with than pasts any day.

"If you had known my husband," she sighed, "I don't mean he beat me." . . .

"Didn't he?"

"Of course not, but there are things bitterer to endure than a beating. A woman will take a beating from the silent strong man and enjoy it," she looked up at me, then her eyes fell quickly and she turned away, "Perhaps I ought not to say that," she faltered.

I thought of Gertrude taking, much less enjoying, a beating from her husband however justly incensed. "I don't think that's true," I said.

"It's true of the One woman I assure you. How unhappy I was, Billy. I would contrast him with

you all the time—what a difference between you, and all to your advantage."

"It seems to me hardly the thing," I said gravely, "to compare one's partner disadvantageously to anyone else. Loyalty means so much in marriage."

"But it isn't everybody who finds somebody worthy of loyalty, or loyal," she sighed, "He never understood me. My life was empty, miserable; cramped."

"Well, he's dead now," I reminded her.

"But too late, too late!" She wrung her hands together, "Fate has been very cruel to me, I think. Everything is too late now."

"Not at all, not at all," I returned briskly. I should be too late for the soles if I stayed much longer.

"I am so glad you think that too!" She draped herself round my neck again and I felt something sticky on my cheek.

I wiped it off and went home to lunch.

I am an affectionate father and there are times when I like to have my entire family round me as a bulwark; at such times the modern family is usually *non est.* Mine was. I only found Gertrude.

Of course I had come to tell her everything. I should not inform her that there had been absurd and long-forgotten passages between Mrs. Smith and myself, because that might annoy her and preju-

dice her against the poor woman who after all was a widow and homeless, but I had every intention of being frank on all other matters, who she was and so on—always provided Gertrude would let me. I don't believe in explanations at all in married life—some people would never be done explaining,—but I believe in being above-board myself, in knowing everything about my wife, and in being helped in any explanations that may be necessary.

Gertrude looked up quickly as I entered, gave me a sharp look and then went on with the paper. Some instinct told me she was not in a helping mood. I went and leaned my back against the mantelpiece, planted my legs firmly on the hearthrug, thrust my hands in my pockets and said:

"Hello, Gertrude!"

"Hello!" she returned, but not in her most genial manner.

I looked down at her with a sense of pride. Certainly she was a good-looking woman; I'm not sure whether she might not almost have been called a beautiful woman. Her hair caught the light, and her skin of rose white and rose red owed nothing to art. She never even required to powder the tip of her nose.

I kissed her hair and said:

"What a pretty new frock, darling! Let me have the bill."

She drew a little away from me, "I have had it

over a year," she said, "odd that you never noticed it before!"

It is true I am not given to ardour, who is at fifty after twenty years of matrimony? but one looks for response in a wife. English wives are so cold. Gertrude need not have looked so surprised, almost suspicious. She need not have changed the conversation by saying:

"Your collar is crumpled."

"Then let me have the bill for a *fresh* frock," I retorted with a laugh. Of course Gertrude has a handsome allowance, but wives don't as a rule object to a little extra. Yet Gertrude in her inconsequent feminine way almost did.

"I don't want another frock," she said brusquely, "this is not a time for extravagance. I should advise you to change your collar before lunch."

"In a minute, in a minute!" I returned looking at the clock. Really the way she avoided reference to Mrs. Smith was too trying. Why couldn't she make an opening for me?

"And I should wash my face too if I were you. There's some red stuff sticking to it."

"How odd!" I said laughing. "I wonder how it could have come there."

"Very odd! Your coat sleeve is in a mess too."

"I must have been leaning up against something," I said.

"Yes," she agreed, "I think you must have been leaning up against something."

After a bit I said: "I hung over the paling for a smoke."

"The palings are green," said Gertrude.

"Are they?" I answered.

All this was getting a long way from Mrs. Smith. I took up my post on the hearth-rug again.

"I don't know why you complained of that hair tonic," said Gertrude, "it seems to have worked a miracle to me." She picked three black hairs off my coat.

I took them from her quickly and dropped them into the grate, flinging my cigar into the grate too, "Oh, I didn't say it wasn't growing *any*," I returned.

"It seems growing them so nice and long," she went on, "but it's a pity to lose them like this, and great waste. I think Billy, that in the future I should advise hairs being kept in their place."

"Yes, my dear," I agreed.

Then there was a silence. This beastly matter of Mrs. Smith had got to be settled. The longer it was put off the worse it became. When I have to have a tooth out I don't make an appointment. I fly to the dentist, fling myself into his chair, grab the gas-bag, and say:

"For God's sake at once!"

That's the truest sort of courage to my way of

thinking. Once you are under gas you can't help having it out.

I went to the door, then I paused just as I was going out, "Oh by the bye," I said, "I was forgetting. About Mrs. Smith. . . ."

"What about her?" asked Gertrude as if astonished to hear of her at all.

"Tommy's mother, you know. . . .at the lodge. . . ."

"Oh, the lady you have sent away! When is she going?"

That was Gertrude all over. Taking everything for granted; giving a man no chance to explain gradually.

"I don't know," I said.

"This week?"

"I hardly think so, my dear."

Gertrude exhibited no surprise. "Perhaps you were unable to fix a date between you?" she asked.

"That was it," I explained. "I thought that for the present, don't you know——"

"Then I may take it that she is to be, like the poor, always with us?"

"What a strange way of expressing yourself, Gertrude," I returned with strong disapproval, "you speak as if she was some sort of curse. She is homeless and a widow: that is her crime. Some of these days it may be yours."

"You look pretty healthy," she returned carelessly,

quite as if she did not care what I looked like, "and I understood your private fortune was settled on me and the children. We should live on here just the same."

She spoke in a most matter-of-fact way as if she had thought it all out, and found it not such a bad idea.

"Just the same," I said outraged in my most sacred feelings, "I am surprised at you, Gertrude. So you're looking forward to it, are you?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you thought it. You are quite ready to make the resigned sort of widow. You are too big to be pathetic, but you can be picturesque. Yet in the natural course of events I should have two years more of life than you."

"Slim people last longer."

I was quite calm, but I was naturally disgusted, "It seems too bad of me to continue here and prevent you enjoying yourself in this rôle you so much fancy. Possibly you will go into half-mourning very soon and not prove entirely inconsolable."

"I hope not."

"You hope not," I repeated, "You hope not! *Gertrude!"* I thought of the Vicar and was glad to remember that his wife was half his age. My wife was counting her chickens before they were despatched.

"I thought we were talking of your friend Mrs. Smith."

"Why my friend?" I asked sharply.

"There's the gong, you have your collar to change and your face to wash. Do not let Perkins see you like that."

"She's as much your friend as mine," I went on doggedly, "Do you remember Rosaleen Lester, well she's her? I knew her slightly when I was a boy. You must have come across her too."

She might have known it for all the surprise and interest she exhibited.

"Did anyone tell you?" I demanded.

"I caught sight of her out of the window yesterday and she reminded me of Miss Lester. I thought it possible."

"And you never warn—never prepared me for the agreeable surprise of meeting an old friend?" How secretive wives are!

"I preferred you should have your agreeable surprise unspoiled. I am glad you were not disappointed." She did not sound it.

"She's had a dreadful time, poor woman," I went on, "do you know she told me there were times when she did not know where to lay her head?"

"What was Mr. Smith doing?" asked Gertrude in her blunt way. Useless to talk in poetical imagery with wives!

"Don't be silly," I exclaimed.

"What else did she tell you?" She glanced at the clock. "She gave you her lifelong history, I suppose. Most interesting I am sure."

"Most pathetic," I corrected.

"So she is the pathetic sort of widow, is she?"

I remember how she had said, 'Now fate has brought me to live as a beggar at your gates!' Yes, she was pathetic—very. Yet how wrong of me to go on being in love with her now she had become a reality instead of a vague sweet dream! What a bad example for Pam! One worships that which lies hidden beyond the veil but sometimes when the veil is torn aside it's more of a shock than anything, and one resolves not to worship any more.

"You will call on her of course?" I demanded.

"I suppose it *is* usual under some circumstances," she returned in an odd voice.

In the hall I ran into Perkins. He seized me by the arm. "Master Willy," he urged, "let me sponge you down before the missus notices." I may be but Master Willy: Gertrude is always 'The missus.'

CHAPTER XI

HOW WIVES TRAIN DAUGHTERS DISGRACEFULLY

WHEN the rest of the party arrived home I almost wished they hadn't; for one by one they fell upon me. Pam was the first; a nice example of a mother's training. If I had my time over again I should have it stated in the marriage settlement that the wife must leave the training of the girls to their father. Then perhaps they'd have a chance of growing up nice modest dutiful creditable girls. As it is. . .!

This was how she started:

"Hello, Old Thing! Back from philandering with the gay widdy!"

"Pam," I said sternly, "you are not to talk like that."

"Didn't she philander with it? Was it too old and fa——plump? What a shame! Never mind, Dad, better luck next time! I should have thought to have looked at her, she'd philander with a scarecrow if she thought there was anything to be got by it. When is she going?"

"Well—you see my dear——"

"Oh, she *did* philander and get round you. I knew it! Men are so weak!"

"Pam you——"

"And she isn't going of course?"

"My dear child, she turns out to be an old friend of your mother's. In fact we all played together when we were kiddies. Now, do you understand?"

"Why didn't mums mention it then?"

"She wasn't certain until I told her."

"Then she was awful pleased—I don't think!"

"Don't be so vulgar child—so *stalely* vulgar."

"Was she more mum's friend than yours? Who did she play with most?"

"I told you we all played together, and it's too many years ago to remember details. Of course we must make her welcome; she has no home, no husband——"

"Some are better without," said my daughter with a grown-up air, "You've no idea how aggravating husbands can be, Dad, because you are only a husband yourself."

"You are a very silly child. You forget your father is also a husband."

She giggled violently and said she hoped so. Really I shall speak seriously to Gertrude about her. I will not have it! It's all that 'smart' school Gertrude sent her to against my better judgment.

"I made up an epigram the other day which made

the mater roar. I said: 'A husband is a thing that can explain away *any* thing.' Wasn't that clever now?"

"It was cheap," I frowned, "which is considered the same thing by the majority, I have heard."

"I thought you might like it for your book."

"What book?" I asked with a jump. "I don't know anything about any book.'

"'All men are liars'," retorted my daughter, "that comes out of another Book but you can prig that too if you like. If you were to write a book Dad it would all be prigged from somebody else, except when you were explaining things out of existence. Have you explained Mrs. Smith as she *really* happened? Why had you to change your coat when you came back? Why won't the red stuff sponge out? Perkins has been at it all day."

"Perkins is a blanketty—I mean a well-meaning idiot," I returned, "Now run away, my dear. I'm busy."

"But I want that horrid woman to go. She's watching Cecil Burn, and dogging John about. Oh she's hot stuff I can tell you!"

"How dare you use such an expression!" I gasped horrified, "As for Cecil Burn, Cecil Burn can go to the devil——"

"I only want to prevent the devil going for Cecil Burn. But what's the good of talking. She's got round you at once of course. That kind of woman

always does. I'm blessed if I know what's the use of being respectable——"

I put my hand over her mouth; then I shook her, "You shall not say such abominable things!" I cried.

She wriggled away, "And John rich enough to tempt her to anything, and having known him before. She will rope you all in——"

I seized her by the arms and placed her outside the door. I paced up and down the room too worried for words. How difficult it is in this world to do the right thing and hang the consequences!

John came in and I had never been less pleased to see him. He flung himself into a chair, stretched out his legs, and said:

"So you've done it. Good biz!"

"Done what?" I asked.

"Cleared her out."

"If you are alluding to Mrs. Smith you are mistaken," I said stiffly, "I hope she will stay as long as she finds it convenient. She happens to be Rosaleen, if you want to know."

"*What!* The woman you told me about! And turning up here like this after twenty years. What a knock-out—I beg your pardon!"

"Not at all, old fellow. A very pleasant surprise of course, but awkward."

"Your wife does not know?" Why he thought of Gertrude first I can't think. He did not really seem to realise how difficult my part was. "Are

you *sure* it's the same? This Mrs. Smith is up to any old plant as I happen to know. She'd blackmail a fellow as soon as look at him—only of course she's got to make him compromise himself first. It can't be the same woman."

"It was once all right," I said gloomily, "women change in twenty years, John."

He looked thoughtful, "For the worse, it seems."

"Naturally—at least I mean. . . ."

"Well old man what are you going to do about it? It doesn't seem quite fair to your wife to let her remain." There he was thinking of Gertrude again! That's just the sort of idiotic thing the Vicar would have said.

"What the—*can* I do about it?" I asked, "Turn her into the ditch?"

"I say what a contrast, isn't it! Guess you felt pretty grateful to her, didn't you? She and that sticky stuff she uses!"

"You—you got some too!" I gasped.

He looked hard at me, then he laid his hand on my shoulder, "Look here Billy old boy, keep off the grass."

I twitched my shoulder away from him. As if that wasn't just what I was trying to do and finding so damned difficult. It was all grass and no paths. I had to keep Gertrude from guessing; I had to keep everybody from guessing, not for my sake, I'm sure, but for hers. Poor woman who was I to

blame her because she had kept her illusion unshattered and loved me still? I wanted to let her down as lightly as possible and get her away, and then forget all about the silly old business. And how was I to set about it, I'd like to know?

"I tell you if you're not careful you'll find yourself with a regular old man of the sea on your back. The daughters of the horse-leech are nothing to Mrs. Smith once she gets going. She's a gambler, a waster, everything but a *decent* bad lot. Don't keep her on here. It's a rotten thing to do."

As if I wanted to keep her on, as he expressed it. What a mess women get you into by marrying you or not marrying you as the case may be!

"Don't be a blanked idiot if you can help it!" I shouted. Really the way people followed me about and gave me impossible advice was sickening. Rawson was bad enough always finding something detectable in my latest nom-de-plume. I could not make up my mind whether to write the book as Jemima Jones or Bobbie Burns, and the publisher was getting mad at the repeated changes necessary in the first printed sheets. Everything was going wrong. Gertrude had seen my writing it once and asked me what I was doing, and when I said I was going through old bills, merely looked incredulous. If she guessed I had once played the fool with Mrs. Smith it would be bad, but if she guessed I was becoming an author and once started could not stop,

it would probably be worse. She would cease to have any respect for me at all.

"Awfully sorry, old man, but I can't help thinking of your wife——"

"I'd advise you to try and help it!" I retorted.

"So rough on her. She's such an angel. Oh hang it! I can't stand the thought of her being hurt!"

"Leave me to attend to my wife's being hurt," I reparteéd. "A husband's the best person to attend to that, thank you." The Vicar was bad enough, but I had got accustomed to him as it were, but that John of all people should start too, was too much.

"If she guesses it will hurt her?" he went on obstinately, "and she's so clear sighted."

"You think so," I returned, knowing how far out he was. Gertrude never saw anything—fortunately. "Well I don't mind telling you she never *has* guessed about that old fool affair."

He was silent.

"And never will guess either," I added.

He shook his head, "Women aren't like that."

"So we've got to go to old bachelors to learn about our wives?" I observed sardonically. I was getting nettled. Everything had seemed to go wrong since we returned from our ideal and peaceful holiday. This was the consequence of giving up a fortnight of my hard-earned holiday for the good of my family.

"She's started on Cecil Burn already, and Tommy——"

"Oh shut it!" I said copying my own son, "I've just had Pam. She said she had 'started' on you."

John gave a jump and his face turned slowly scarlet. "But surely Miss Pam——"

"Oh, of course she knows it's no business of hers and doesn't care, but there's Tommy and——"

"I—but Miss Pam—surely——!" He seemed all guilty confusion and I could not but wonder if there might not be something in it after all. He had known her before and was quite bitter about her. Men sometimes feel bitter about the women they have known before, and wish to goodness they had stayed away.

"Pam said things that would have made a navvy blush. The way Gertrude brings her up is shocking."

John went red all over his face, "You must allow me to——"

"You're not her father and don't know anything about it," I returned, and I got away from John.

Then I fell into Rupert. Rupert of all people seeking me! The boy was mum unless he wanted something, and I had made up my mind to refuse the young prodigal whatever it was.

"Gov'nor," he said in low deep solemn tones, "you've got to put the lid on Mrs. Smith. Tommy don't like her. Give her the boot, I mean." Then he disappeared without waiting for comment.

I went into the hall—and found it filled with Perkins.

"Master Willy," he said in a sepulchral voice, "I done as you said about Miss Tommy, and a nicer young lady never stepped, but regard Mrs. Smith as a member of the family I won't was it ever so."

"You can go——" I began furiously.

But Perkins had already gone.

There was nothing for it but to find Gertrude. A wife's presence can be very soothing when she likes. The tragedy of it is she does not always like. This seemed one of her 'off' times. She looked tired too, and rather as if she wanted to be sympathised with than sympathise.

"Have you got a headache?" I asked concerned. She did not often look so pale.

"No, thank you."

"If you had had a headache I should have tucked you up in bed and put cologne on your forehead," I said.

She smiled rather feebly.

Cecil Burn passed us in a great hurry.

"Where is he going?" I asked thinking of Pam.

"To the lodge I expect," she answered wearily. "It is where everybody is going now, isn't it?"

It struck me that if Cecil made a fool of himself over Mrs. Smith who was of course a very fascinating creature, Pam would not make a fool of herself over him, and that it might not be such a

bad way out of a difficulty. Pam would learn sense when she was older. A nice sort of mess this world would be in if everybody married their first love!

I said what I thought of Cecil Burn.

"You would let your prejudices spoil a girl's life?"

"Her life would gain not lose without him——"

"I know what he is and what he's capable of and I have thought it a most fortunate arrangement if it comes off."

"Then you will oppose me—me your husband?"

"If necessary for her happiness," she returned quietly, "happiness is too rare to be missed. She shall have hers if there is anything I can do to get it for her. One learns by experience, bitter experience perhaps, and one realises there is always his left: to help others to what we have missed ourselves."

She got up and left me. That's your modern wife. I had come to be soothed; she opposed me. For sympathy; she defied me. After nearly twenty years when I had needed her most she had failed me. The tragedy of matrimony: an unaccustomed tragedy too as far as I was concerned. I had always been able to count on her before.

I thought I might as well go and help Tommy with the garden.

"So your mother has come," I said cheerfully,

"and my wife and she and I turn out to be old acquaintances. Odd, isn't it?"

"Yes, she told me," said the girl going on with her work. She was looking very worried I thought, and there was no ready smile to disperse the sadness of her face.

I wondered, a little uneasily, how much Mrs. Smith had told her daughter. Women are given to exaggerating and especially in these matters; they will make a romance out of nothing, and goodness knows what they will make out of an old flirtation. It was rather a delicate position for me to be in. It's always the man who has to bear the brunt of these affairs in the end. The woman picks the fruit and the man gets dropped on.

Mrs. Smith came out of the lodge and ran gaily up to us. She was dressed quite differently to Gertrude. Gertrude has a knack of always appearing in the right thing for every occasion. If there had been a big garden-party Mrs. Smith would have been in the right thing, but there was no garden party, there was only the garden—and me. Tommy did not count because she sent her into the lodge to look for her handkerchief.

"Well, do you recognise this old thing?" she asked sitting down by me.

It did not look old to me, it looked very new, and very much like one Pam had chosen for a big func-

tion; at least it was made in the same picture girlish way.

"Silly Billy," she said, "the old fashions have come round again, flounced full skirts and all."

I had been told that before; yet the new styles somehow had a very different 'cut' or 'line' or 'swing' or whatever you call it, to the old, and this had all these things very much pronounced. It did not come as far down either as the old fashions I remembered.

"Yes, but that looks new," I said.

"Oh Billy! The dress you proposed to me in three times! The dress we parted in! Don't you remember the stars, the moon all white and—and solemn? Never, never shall I forget. If only you had not misunderstood, gone off in pique and——"

"Mrs. Smith I think?" said Gertrude and held out her hand.

I went hot all over. Could she have heard anything it would be nicer for her own feelings not to have heard? She was looking very smiling, very happy—and extremely beautiful.

"Why, Gertrude!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith and seemed astonished, not quite pleased. I wonder if she had forgotten how lovely Gertrude was. They got on splendidly together and seemed great friends at once which I was delighted with of course. Mrs. Smith had tea with us that afternoon and Gertrude

said the oftener she came, and quite informally, the more pleased she would be.

After tea I escorted Mrs. Smith back to the lodge. She reminded me of a lot of things I had forgotten and made me come inside to see how quaint it all was, and I found it difficult to get away.

In fact, I was late for dinner.

In answer to my apologies Gertrude only smiled and told me she had expected me to be late. She said Mrs. Smith was fascinating and she hoped we should see a lot of her. Then she and John talked together in low voices. I wondered if she meant I was to see much of Mrs. Smith and little of her. I felt so put out I went to bed in daylight, an unprecedented event.

I was not wanted downstairs and a man feels being in the way. Gertrude was very much more interested in John than in me. I was only her husband. Husbands don't count with the wives of to-day. They are something to earn a living for one, the nicer the living the better, but at other times she simply has no use for him.

When Gertrude appeared she gave a start of astonishment, "Why, it's never Billy!" she said.

I feigned sleep.

In the morning another unprecedented event happened. I woke up first.

Gertrude looked very calm and peaceful asleep in the morning light. I had never seen her like

that before and was rather struck with her appearance.

I kissed her, "Good morning darling," I said.

She sat up and opened her eyes very wide and stared and stared. "Why, if it isn't *Billy!*" she gasped at length.

Then she asked me if I was not feeling well.

I felt very put out with Gertrude.

CHAPTER XII

HOW WIVES ARE SO SUSPICIOUS

HOW carelessly we give a promise! How lightly we set foot upon the way that is to prove so long and trying! If I had not promised Rawson to go on to the bitter end, that I both would and could fulfil the impossible, I should have chucked it before this. Then the publisher who said such pleasant things to start with, says things far from pleasant now. He writes every second day to know if I have not finished *yet*. Each few sheets as I write are torn away from me and sent to the printers. I have nothing to refer back to; I forget what I have, and have not, said. It is enough to make a fellow repeat himself or contradict himself or something.

I'd so much rather omit this chapter and let you take it as read, and I daresay you would rather I omitted it also. Once started I should be all right, but it's so difficult to start. Shall I begin with the letter, or with what happened afterwards: what I said, or what Gertrude said? Then there's the cheque book; and Pam who dared to——

Do you remember an illustration of a young man with a trailer behind his motor-bicycle. It is an empty trailer, but he is depicted as saying, "Look out Auntie, there's a steep bit coming!"

Only *I* have more than one passenger. I started with a 'bus full, and the hope that you would accompany me to the end. It might be business, but it was not very sporting of you to refuse your tenpenny fares till the journey was over. What if there is nobody to collect from? What if I have brought the beastly bus all the way for nothing? I conclude that the conductor will be left—if she's a lady, but you cannot collect from the conductor. You have to carry him or her free and suffer from comments on your driving into the bargain. I have been told that mine is an erratic course; that I have taken the steep bits in such a fashion that my load lightens every time. I have been told a lot of other things too.

In my turn I tell you this: a true sportsman would have taken the risk and paid first. He would just have held on tighter at the steep bits and set his teeth. He would not have left me to plough the lonely furrow. He would have said it might be a bit rocky but it wasn't so bad for a man who was driving for the first time in his life. Hang it! he would have encouraged me, had he had any sporting instincts at all. Instead he doesn't even wait till I stop, to alight.

It seems to me I have shipped the sort of people who think nothing of sneaking out of church before the sermon and collection. Of course I can say it's *your* loss; unfortunately it's my loss too. The advertisement of having carried you safely to the end would have filled my 'bus for me next time; now I should not wonder if it becomes a sort of derelict.

Well, all this is to warn anybody who may be left that there's another steepish bit coming. Oh, I say you *might* hang on! It's twenty times worse for the driver.

Now I've got away from the 'bus, which is an allegory, and I'm going to tell you the whole story in my frank truthful manner. Poetical I do not pretend to be, perhaps not always grammatical, but I'm a nailer for the truth!

It was after dinner the beastly thing started—some time after dinner to be exact. I was sitting in my study alone. There was a time when Gertrude would have been glad of my company, but that is not the way of the modern wife. She is glad of other people's company, your bachelor friends' for instance, but yours isn't sufficiently exciting.

Perkins came in. He was looking both mysterious and put out, and he had a note in his hand.

He held it out to me. "To be given to you when you were alone, Master Willy."

I took it—not too willingly. He remained hover-

ing. Perkins has been so long in the family that we are supposed to have no secrets from him, and I don't suppose we have as many as we think.

"That's all right," I said in a tone of dismissal. I knew he hoped I would open it and read it to him, or tell him its contents. At times we do so—it is less trouble in the long run—but something warned me that this was the sort of communication to be guarded at all costs.

"You may go," I said, and looking very hurt, he went. So far—so good: for the time-being I was rid of Perkins.

Then I read the note; it was much what I expected somehow, only perhaps a little more so.

"Dearest Billy," it began.

"Oh the joy to use the dear old name again! I am in great trouble and must see you to-night without fail. Please come to me by ten if possible; if you do not come I will tap at your study window at ten-thirty and slip in for a moment.

Ever your Dark Rosaleen."

Now that's what I call a compromising letter for a married man to get! It might make some fellows feel rather pleased with themselves and no end of a gay dog. It didn't make me feel a dog at all, or gay either. It put me into a regular fuss. Suppose someone was to see it! Suppose someone was to see me creeping down to the lodge at ten, though only ten by Daylight Saving time. Hang

it all, not content with making me uncomfortable, that beastly Bill was making me feel disreputable!

What if I didn't go? Then she would come here. I would either have to let her in, when we should certainly be discovered together by someone, or I could be out, when she would be found tapping outside as if waiting for the accustomed signal. It was a nice sort of hole to put a man of fifty into, a happily-married man of twenty years!

If Gertrude had ever guessed the old story dead and buried years ago. I should have gone straight to her and asked her what I was to do, and Gertrude would have seen to it that I wasn't worried, but she had never guessed and I had so carefully hidden it all away from her. If she found out now it would look so sly of me to have hidden it, almost as if there had been something quite serious to hide. I had always saved the poor girl's feelings as much as possible, and the habit of a lifetime held; I determined to go on saving them. She should never know.

I looked at the clock. Five minute to ten! It took about five minutes on a dark night to reach the lodge. How like a woman to choose a pitch dark night! If I did not start at once she would be here. If I started someone would be bound to see me go and ask awkward questions. I went hot and cold. What a quandary! I put my head out of the window. It was raining. That was a woman all

over—make things as difficult as possible. Well, I must do something and do it quickly.

I strolled idly into the hall. Only Perkins was there. He did not seem astonished to see me. He came up to me with the air of a guilty conspirator.

"Master Willy, don't go," he implored, and the old fool had tears in his eyes, "After all these years——"

"Go to the devil, Perkins!" I said in a furious whisper.

"Sir," he said, and it gave me a queer feeling to be addressed like that, "Would to God I'd had the chance of going instead of you."

Ten o'clock struck. I slipped through the door somehow. I must go or worse would happen.

What was the 'trouble?' Was Tommy ill? But surely she would not have sent like that: she would have let Gertrude know. I was glad to remember Tommy would be there, and drew a breath of relief. After all, there was nothing in going to see one's lady-gardener and her mother. I had to tell her about those new seeds anyway. Then I stumbled over something in the dark, and it rained harder, and perhaps I expressed myself as my wife says I shouldn't. Then I held my breath. I could have sworn to stealthy footsteps. I listened, and I wondered how any man had the nerve to be a burglar, but all was silence. Nerves, I told myself.

I decided I would not stay more than five minutes. I should be back before I was missed. Gertrude used always to find me to say good-night before she went up, but lately she had hardly bothered to look for me at all. I would get back and go straight up to my dressing-room and have been there all the time.

I fell over something else and I wondered if there was anything so unreasonable in the world as other women. How differently Gertrude would have acted. She would at least have found my electric torch for me.

I got to the lodge door and knocked. I did not make very much noise. I thought it better not.

All the same the door was instantly opened by Mrs. Smith herself. She wore a pale pink wrapper and her long dark hair was down. How dingy black hair looks like that! no fair gold; no shimmer of light. The part on her head was very wavy, but the rest was quite straight. I thought she might have got it even when she was about it. Why dress in that intimate way at all, and where was Tommy? I decided I would not stay five seconds.

"Hush," she said putting her finger to her lip, "Tommy might hear."

I wanted her to hear and to come down—the sooner the better.

"That's all right," I replied, "I've got a message for Tommy."

She put her fingers over my lips, "Tommy must not come down and find you here with me at this time," she whispered, "Oh Billy, you little know what it is to have a suspicious ungrateful daughter!"

She drew me into the tiny sitting-room and closed the door. I began to feel as a rat must feel when the trap shuts down on it. I made for the door. She was leaning up against it and our hands met. Hers clung to mine.

"Oh Billy, just like old times!"

I removed her from before the door and turned the handle.

She began to cry—at least she made noises and put her handkerchief up to her face. On the rare occasions that Gertrude cries, the tears roll down her cheeks and her eyes and nose get red. Mrs. Smith's was not that sort of crying.

She caught my hand, "Oh Billy, you would not wish to find me dead or dying on your doorstep."

I was horrified at the idea. It would probably be Gertrude or Perkins that found her, and any last message she might leave. I am sorry for any woman who loves in vain, but I'm sorry for the man in the case too. It's not really nice for him either.

"How can you suggest such a thing!" I gasped.

"But there is no other course unless you will

help me." She leant up against my shoulder; pressed her cheek to mine.

I wiped my cheek and said:

"Is it money?"

"Oh Billy how clever of you to guess! What made you think it might be money?"

"Things so often are," I returned. I wondered how much she wanted. I held my money in trust for Gertrude, and did not fancy the idea of any woman robbing my wife with my connivance, but if that was the only way to quiet her, there was nothing else for it.

Mind you, I was very sorry for her, very sorry indeed. It was of course an excellent thing that she had found refuge at my gates. I was glad to meet her again and was quite ready to laugh at the past with her, but I did not want her to do anything to upset Gertrude. As I have said, Gertrude has the sweetest temper as a rule, and is very placid and easy-going, but when she's upset—well, she's upset. The calm placid ones can give you the unexpected shock. I assure you I could not bear, so affectionate is my disposition, and so mild, to have Gertrude put out with me. When you're married, you're married. It mayn't be awfully romantic after twenty years but there's no harm in making the best of it, as I have always done, and living in harmony. We were middle-aged people with a grown-up family, soon we might even become grand-

parents, and even incipient grand-parents should not be upset. I had felt older lately and not any too well, and Gertrude instead of noticing it, had gone out of her way to ignore it. Once she would have made such a fuss of me that it had almost been worth while to 'go sick' now and then if only to keep her in practice. But once was not now. Oh, how different pasts can be from presents!

Suppose Gertrude could see me now with Mrs. Smith crying in my arms! What would she think? What would anybody think? Pink wrappers and hair down aren't much aid to a compromising situation. I felt most horribly compromised.

I remember John once saying: "She will compromise you—but without compromising herself if you take me?" I had taken him, but the thought occurring at such a time did not make me feel any better. Suppose I got found out and the whole thing was known? I should not look a knave—who minds that! I should look a damned sight worse—I should look a fool. A sickly sentimental fool—a duped fool! I must not offend Gertrude and I must not offend Mrs. Smith. How was I to steer a safe course between them?

Women are so exacting. If Gertrude knew about the past I had so carefully concealed from her she would think it distrustful and unloving of me, and if she knew about the present she might make it really hot for me. You would not think to look at

Gertrude she could make it hot for a fellow, but in her own peculiar way she could. Then if Mrs. Smith knew what I felt for Gertrude she would make it hot for me too. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' Look at Joseph: he found that out, poor fellow. Mrs. Smith could tell Gertrude she had just refused me an hour before I had proposed to her; that I had only married her out of pique because I could not get the woman I really did want. A nice lie for a wife to listen to; perhaps swallow. It seemed to me I was in a wretched position with nobody either to help or pity me.

Perhaps Gertrude would miss me suddenly. Perhaps she would come and fetch me and there would be . . . . explanations? Perspiration covered my forehead. Oh woman, woman, since the days of Eve never satisfied till the man is in a cleft stick! Would Gertrude miss me, or was she finding the time pass too pleasantly with her admirer John? My blood boiled at the thought. A nice time of night for one's wife to be with another, perhaps alone with him. I had half a mind to rush back there and then and see for myself.

"I must go," I said, "go at once."

She clung tightly round me. How strangling women can be! "Hush! Not so loud! Think of my reputation! If Tommy should hear!"

Nobody seemed to think of my reputation or to

bother about it. Perhaps women think men have no reputations.

"I tell you I must go," I repeated.

"You haven't heard yet. It is an old bill of my husband's, just turned up. A hundred pounds! Only a laughable trifle to you I know, but a serious matter to me!"

I did not consider it so laughable. I had hoped to get off for a fourth of that.

"A wife is not responsible for her husband's debts, above all a widow cannot be claimed against——" I began. I did not know whether this was the law or not, but it sounded plausible enough to me, and if a man knows little about law, he can always count on a woman knowing less.

"A debt of honour," she said, reprovingly, "if I cannot pay it there will be nothing for me but to stay here always to hide from the creditor."

"You want to leave?" I asked.

"I want to be in a position to be free to leave," she corrected, "Of course it is a darling little lodge and I love it, but it is different rather to the house I had in Park Lane, isn't it, and sometimes I feel just a teeny weeny bit cramped. You are not offended, are you?"

"No," I said warmly, "I am not in the least offended. It must be dreadfully inadequate for you. If there was anything I could do to help you to find something more to your taste——"

"Perhaps if the other debt of a hundred was settled too," she said softly, "one is so much freer with the burden removed, is one not?"

"Indeed one is," I replied heartily, "Of course you must pay these two bills. I will send you the cheque to-morrow."

"For old times sake! *Dear* Billy!"

I got away as soon as possible and home. All the time, such is the force of imagination, I thought I heard footsteps following. Of course it was all nonsense and I knew it was nonsense, but I did not like it all the same. What awkward things can happen to a fellow—and through no fault of his own! This was the result of my unselfish consideration for Gertrude's feelings.

I have read books in which a husband intrigued with a wife—another fellow's I mean of course. To read it you would suppose the fellow thought it quite a lark, and that these dashing exploits were good sport. All I know is, the writer had never been through it himself or he would have known better. It is not in the least funny; it drives you almost silly. You are dodging this, avoiding that, rushing for an impasse or steep cliffs. You find yourself without room to turn round and fairly up against it.

I had managed Mrs. Smith it is true, but I had still to manage Gertrude, and let me tell you it is not so easy for a man to manage his wife these

days. Half the time they are managing you. Oh, they think you do not see it, but you do, only you don't want to make a fuss, and so you let them suppose they have done the trick. Of course she might only suppose I was very late coming up, but it was more likely the perversity of woman had made her search high and low for me and her first question would be:

"*Wherever* have you been?"

Such a crudely direct question! What was I to answer I'd like to know? I'd been for a little stroll? I never did go for an evening stroll by myself. I never strolled in the dark or in the rain with anybody, for I hated both. There you are! An easy job—I don't think!—as Rupert would say.

What would you have said yourself? Without giving anything away I mean of course, and without stooping to lying or deceit either. Precious easy, isn't it? Now I suppose you see why I wanted to miss out this beastly chapter and write 'finis.' Wouldn't you miss out these chapters in your own life if you could? I bet you would—at fifty! Would Gertrude be asleep or wouldn't she be asleep? Would she play it really low down and pretend to be asleep, so that I should have to lie awake all night not knowing how much she knew, and making up a proper tale for the morning? Would she wait till I was barely awake at seven-thirty (by new time) and off my guard, and suddenly say:

"Where were you between so and so last night?"

At such an hour I might so easily blurt out too much. I was no match for the guile of Eve before breakfast; in fact, I did not care to tackle guile before eleven o'clock.

As I slipped into the house, the clock struck. I had to remind myself it was an hour fast; that was bad enough, but the other would have been fatal.

Perkins crept up to me. He had my quilted winter bath-slippers—the ones Gertrude had made for me—in his hands. He said:

"Master Willy, let me take off your boots and slip on these. Then maybe nobody won't hear nothink."

I let the poor old man have his way.

Then I went quietly upstairs to my dressing-room. I am not the thoughtless sort of person who whistles going up the stairs and wakes a slumbering household. I did not want to wake anybody if I could help it.

I took off my collar and put it in the clothes-basket. It was full of collars.

Then I tripped over something and fell with a terrible crash. My luck all over! No use to hope Gertrude was not awake now. She was bound to be awake.

The door opened and she came towards me. She had her hair down too, in a plait, a nice thick one, and a blue dressing-gown. What a contrast to Mrs.

Smith! If only the top of her head had not bristled so with the waving things! It made her look so much more formidable. "Hello Gertrude," I said.

She looked at me, then she took the lid off the clothes-basket and looked inside, "I see you have changed your collar again," she said.

"I am undressing, my dear," I returned mildly.

I thought it better to say nothing more, but I flung off my coat and put it down lining up. She watched me in silence. Why couldn't she say something? How was I to explain before I knew how much she knew? If I said the wrong thing and committed myself in the slightest she might suspect me. As long as a wife does not suspect one can manage. To start her suspecting is a hopeless game, for you never know when it will end, you only know that it never will end. It will be like one of these 'snow-balls' or 'chain' things that have been declared illegal. You could break them easier than you can break a wife's suspicions.

"So you've come back," she said at last thoughtfully.

I realised that she had looked for me, "My dear girl," I said laughing, "What an extraordinary thing to say! Doesn't a husband always come back to his wife?" I hummed a gay little tune. I forget now what tune it was: anyway it was a gay and careless one.

"That," returned Gertrude in a sombre tone, "is the wife's misfortune."

The blood rushed to my face as I thought of John. So that was what it was coming to, was it? I was Gertrude's misfortune!

If I had been larger or she smaller I should have shaken her and taught her who was master. As it was what could I do? Pam would not think it, my real friends would not think it—though her relations might and mine too for all I cared—a 'misfortune!'

"It's a good thing tastes differ," I said grimly.

"It's nice to be really appreciated at last isn't it?" she replied, and laughed.

John had been appreciative from the first; no doubt of that.

"You have discovered that, have you?"

"I think I have always known it," she returned in her calm sad way.

"You know I have been out?" I asked cautiously.

She glanced at my wet clothes, "Obvious I think."

"It was just a wandering fit," I said after a pause.

She looked at me oddly, "Just a wandering fit," she repeated in a strange voice.

"Down the drive and up the drive," I went on,

thankful to be able to tell ever so little of the truth, "Round and about, you know."

"A long way round, I think," and she went into her own room.

"Gertrude," I began following her. What a miserable business it was! What a worm I felt, but how could I help it!

"Shut the door please, there's a draught."

I could see she meant me to shut myself outside with the draught. I complied if not very gently. This was what one got for trying to explain. You were received with suspicion, treated as if you had done something you should not do.

I did not get a wink of sleep all night. Suddenly a fearful thought occurred to me? Where had I left that fatal letter? I plainly remembered putting it down somewhere, but *where*? Had I hidden it? I hid things really well but I seldom remembered where I had put them and they had a habit of turning up in the most unexpected places. Suppose this letter turned up? Suppose Gertrude found it; she usually found my things for me in the end.

Had I left it at the lodge? That would not matter. Mrs. Smith would be sure to destroy it. But suppose I had dropped it in the drive? I could swear I had not brought it back into the house with me, even though I remember putting it somewhere previously.

I decided to rise at six (Daylight Saving time)

and have a good hunt. Would you believe it? The only bit I slept was from about that time onwards. When I woke the rest of the house was up and about. I had little chance of finding the letter first.

I decided to have breakfast in a gay mood and immediately afterwards slip down to the lodge with the cheque and ask Mrs. Smith—through the window—if she had seen anything of the letter.

Gertrude was at the head of the table when I went into the breakfast-room.

I waved my hand gaily, "Hello, Gertrude!" I said.

She said nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

HOW WIVES PREFER TO MISUNDERSTAND

BREAKFAST is seldom a hilarious time in well-regulated households. This was an even less hilarious breakfast than usual. My wife confined her conversation to:

"Please pass the toast. Any more coffee William?" If there is one thing I object to Gertrude calling me, it is William. What's wrong with Billy I should like to know? It had served for close on twenty years, forty, counting the years since we had known each other, and was surely good enough for a little more active service.

Then Rupert and Pam seemed amused at something and did not share the joke with me. They caught each other's eye continually and went off into explosive noises. Gertrude made no attempt to check them; when I tried to frown them down they but exploded the louder. John was there of course, in the next seat to Gertrude. He spent his time avoiding my eye, and I hope he had the grace to feel ashamed of himself. He certainly looked rather worried.

As soon as breakfast was over,—my breakfast that is,—I went into my study. I would get that cheque off and be done with it. Two hundred pounds! a nice sum to have to pay to get a woman off your premises after all the trouble she had caused you. Still, now she had taken to writing me such letters I owed it to Gertrude to do my best to get rid of her.

I went to my writing-table. Then I gave a start of horror. There lying open, the words in their big bold writing, forcing themselves on you, was the lost letter!

It gave me a shock I can tell you, for I knew Gertrude must have seen it. If only I had guessed last night! How different my explanations would have been, though how I should explain away 'Ever your dark Rosaleen' I don't know.

How beastly sly of Gertrude! Never warning me! Letting me commit myself, for I had probably said nothing about hearing from Mrs. Smith or going to see her.

Who else had seen it? Who had searched for me last night? How like a modern family to go hunting about and coming across things! I felt in my very bones that from Perkins downwards everybody had read that letter and put their silly construction upon it—when I say construction I mean of course misconstruction.

I tore it up, and flung the pieces towards the

waste paper basket. They flew all over the floor but I had no time to pick them up.

I got out my cheque book and scrawled out a cheque to Mrs. Smith—Mrs. Rosaleen Smith as she had requested me,—and entered it hurriedly on the counterfoil. Then I addressed the envelope to her. I was just going to tear off the cheque and put it in when Gertrude entered. I gasped for a moment, for really of all the luck! . . but I did not lose my presence of mind. I turned the envelope wrong side up and dropped it on the cheque, shutting up the book.

Then I turned and said casually:

"Hello, Gertrude."

"I must apologise for interrupting you at your business," she said formally. "I did not guess you would start so early. Mr. Brown is here from the office, he says——"

"Never mind Brown now," I said rather desperately, "Gertrude I can explain every thing!" I only wished I could.

"I would rather you would not subject yourself to the strain," she said in quite a nasty tone, "After a woman has lived with a man for nineteen years explanations are superfluous."

"You talk as if you had found it a very long time."

"Twenty years is not a small slice out of one's life," she returned, "it leaves little save the core."

"Look here," I said plunging, "you read that letter of course?"

"How could I help seeing it? I thought at first it was left for me to read."

"So it was, my dear," I said, "so it was!" I realised now that if Gertrude was to see it in the end, it would have been better for me to have shown it her myself and told her the truth—at least some of it.

She looked me up and down and I felt myself shrivel. It was not a nice feeling. Alice in Wonderland was nothing to it. Taller and taller towered Gertrude till her head reached the stars and the fire shone from her eyes and the nimbus of her hair; lower and lower sunk I, till I was no more than a cockroach at her feet! A nice way of looking up to me and keeping her vows!

"Billy!"

"Yes Gertrude?" I replied, in rather a cockroachy voice I shouldn't wonder. If Rawson had not made me promise I'd not write another word. I'm a sticker and I'm telling everything, but it's simply frightful to have to show oneself in such an undignified light. How I curse Rawson at times! The master of the house made to feel at a positive disadvantage.

"The signature must have amused you," I said looking out of the window, "I used to call her 'Dark

Rosaleen' when I was a boy—for fun you know. To tease her. You know what boys are?"

"Which aged boy was this, fifteen, thirty, fifty?"

"How can you be so ridiculous, Gertrude. When I was a kid of course. Don't you remember when we were all kids together?"

"I remember perfectly," she said, "you used to tell the truth then. Now it sometimes seems you tell everything but the truth. Must I tell you I also saw that cheque——"

I started, and then determined to make a clean breast of it. Let her know the worst, let her hate me—I daresay I deserved it—anything would be better than this.

"Gertrude," I cried wildly, "I can explain everything——"

I spoke to the closing door. Gertrude had gone. I saw Brown and packed him back to his business—the silly fool!—as if I hadn't enough to see to, and then I took the cheque to the lodge. Mrs. Smith was at the window and I handed it in to her.

"Oh you darling," she cried opening it, "ever so many thanks!" She blew me a kiss.

I turned, and ran into the arms of Pam and Rupert. They were both looking very solemn; they took each an arm and marched me away. When we got to a quiet bit they stopped, looked me in the eyes, and said:

"Well, Dad?"

It's coming to something, I think, when a father is made to feel in the wrong by his own children. When a child will judge the parent find him guilty, condemn him!

"Well what?" I snapped.

Rupert made a noise like a clock going to strike, and at last in a shrill falsetto shrieked:

" 'No earthly' bluffing."

"We know everything," said Pam.

"We read the letter," added Rupert.

"You dishonourable young scoundrel aren't you ashamed to go prying open people's letters and reading them?"

"It *was* open," returned the impudent lad, "hit me in the eye. Then Pam came and it hit her in the eye too."

"Fancy us with a regular night-outer of a father!" burst out Pam with a giggle.

"Ever your own Rosaleen," said the young blackguard giggling also. Then he became exceedingly solemn. I remembered Vice Versa where the boy becomes the parent in authority, and the unfortunate parent the boy. I used to think it impossible rot. I was not so sure now. "Look here gov'nor this is the long an' short of it. You've got to chuck it. A feller can't have his old gov'nor makin' him so damridiculous. If this leaks out I'm in the cart. Shan't be able to show myself outside."

I was speechless.

"Yes," said Pam nodding in agreement, "that's it. Dad, I told you she was hot stuff, but fancy you! It makes me think of a modern comedy, naughty but frightfully funny. Still one doesn't like parents breaking out like this. Another *billet doux* this morning! Oh you bad thing!" Then she hugged my arm and her voice softened, "Of course we know it was all her fault really and just your soft heart——"

I distinctly heard Rupert add, "And soft head!" And I was so placed, so seemingly in the wrong, that I could only pretend not to hear! It was not at all the right position for a father of a family to be in but that was the last thing they thought of.

"Poor old Dad . . . . but you shouldn't be so weak, Old Thing. You know anybody can get round you with a little soft sawder. I suppose she thought that pink thing and her nasty hair down would appeal to you——"

I jumped.

"You see we heard you go creepy crawly down the drive a minute after we had read the note, and we thought it our duty, as being responsible for our parent, to creepy crawly too. We heard things you said when you tripped. We creeped to the lodge and saw her let you in with a 'Hush'!"

"Yes," broke out Rupert, "what have you got to say to that?"

"I suppose," said Pam thoughfully, "there are always women in this world who let one in with a hush."

I was appalled, "Now dare you suppose such outrageous things!" I gasped.

"Seeing's believing," she returned, and added, "We thought you had better be kept under our eye. We could see quite nicely through the blind. Poor old Dad, how we crammed our handkerchiefs in our mouths when you started getting between the furniture and her, and she chased you round the chair and kissed you. I lost a bob on that for I bet Ru you wouldn't let her catch you. Oh Dad, why did you? Some of that hair that was hanging down was pinned on."

"A nice way to go on—I don't think!" rumbled Rupert.

"Promise to send her away Dad, and we won't scold you any more."

"She is going away," I told my daughter, "very shortly."

Rupert blushed and became suddenly the boy while I returned to the status of parent, "It's Tommy," he stammered, "awful for her having such a rotter of a mother. I thought if the old woman got the push Tommy might brisk up a bit. Awfully sporting of you to go there in the middle of the night and *give* her the push. 'Spose that note now was a notice?"

"Something of the sort," I said truthfully enough, for the woman realised perfectly well it was the price of her absence.

Rupert departed, but Pam clung to my arm, "Dad" she said growing suddenly pink, "there's something most special I want to ask you——"

I broke away and fled before she had time to ask it.

I sought Perkins. No he had not gone into the study. Had he seen any note lying about he would have taken the liberty of removing it.

He sank his voice, the benign old parson became the stern mentor who had detected a pet choir-boy in some serious crime:

"My God, Master Willy, it won't get us into the Divorce Court, will it?"

My heart turned to water. If you think it was my own disgrace I thought of, you are mistaken. First and last I thought of nothing but Gertrude. I should lose her; she would believe the worst. I should have to go through the rest of my life without her—and without Pam. I sank half fainting into a chair.

Perkins poured some brandy down my throat, though owing to the condition of his hand, he poured more down my collar and outside generally.

"As bad as that," he got out at last, "Oh the poor missus! Sir, as long as you haven't given that——" I cannot repeat the awful term be used—

"money, we may pull round yet. I don't mind swearing on hoath that you never went out that night. You was in the pantry with me helping to clean the silver. No one come into the pantry between nine and morning."

"Curse it! I *have* given her money," I got out, "Two hundred pounds."

"Then we're in Court," said Perkins faintly, and covered himself with the rest of the brandy.

I wondered if Gertrude, once safely rid of me, would marry the Vicar. Then I remembered she could not do that as matters stood. Perhaps she would prefer to marry John and enter into possession of the Haighlands. It was a bright look forward I must say!

Perkins had not finished:

"Maybe there ain't no witnesses," he said more cheerfully, "nobody ever seed you kiss her?"

" I—I don't think so," I got out.

"Master Willy thinkin' won't save us; you've got to be sure."

"I think—I have an idea—she was seen trying to . . . . to kiss me sort of," I got out. To have one faithful friend, one adviser was something.

"Did you let her catch you?" he demanded.

"I tried not to, really I did," I cried, for I could see he did not believe me, "but she might have succeeded, I—I rather fancy she did, you know."

Perkins shook his head; he seemed beyond speech.

"Of course——" I began.

"Could we get them witnesses put away, Master Willy?"

I shuddered, and explained.

"Oh sir, we'll have the rest of the family into Court with us, an' them so young and innocent, no more'n babies in knowledge of the world. Master Willy, Master Willy how could you go for to do it?"

"Because I was a damned ass," I said fiercely, and told him the whole story.

The poor old man cried, and I very nearly cried too. He said it was so much harder to be hanged for a lamb than for a sheep, and that was just what I felt about it myself. If you're going to be condemned don't be innocent. If you've got to pay, at least see that you have first got the goods paid for. I don't know whether Gertrude would think of divorcing me, somehow I could not fancy her doing anything of that sort, but the thing was bound to make a difference between us, and I had lied so and contradicted myself, that she would not listen to an explanation or believe the truth. Also she might welcome the chance of getting rid of me. I could not forget what she had said about a change. Suppose she grasped this opportunity. The Law would give her, as the injured party, the children.

I should be bereft of everything and everybody. Worse than all I should look a fool in the witness box. I knew I was bound to look ridiculous any way, and after being so respected and all that sort of thing, it wasn't exactly a pleasant prospect.

Perkins staggered away at length, leaving me but cold comfort.

Five minutes later John appeared. He placed his hand on my shoulder, "Old fellow," he said, "I'm awfully sorry, but I saw that infernal note last night. I'm afraid you went?"

I forgot he was my rival, and remembered he was my oldest friend, the brother of my choice.

"I'm in a mess," I said.

"She's got round you, fixed you up a bit?"

I nodded. Why deny it?

"Given her money, old man?"

I nodded again.

"Much?"

"Two hundred."

"A bit stiff that. Does your wife know anything about it? Take my advice make a clean breast of it to her."

"She will not listen," I said miserably, "she has quite turned against me lately. She told me she'd like a change; a honeymoon with another man."

John looked amazed, "Well, you must have made her mad about something first or she was joking."

"She was in dead earnest," I sighed.

John was silent for a bit, then he said pointing to the empty carafe:

"I say you've never drunk all that this morning. No wonder your nerves are a bit shaky. I think I hear your wife. Now old fellow make a clean breast of it and all will be well."

He slipped away.

Some devil made me say:

"Hello Gertrude!" as she entered.

Some devil made her smell the brandy that was spilled over me, and see the empty bottle. She said:

"So you have taken to this too. You are absolutely reeking." She turned to leave the room.

I caught hold of her desperately, "I can explain everything. Only let me explain——"

She pulled herself away.

"When I want your explanations Billy, I will ask for them," she said, and left the room. I daresay she thought I had been drinking, thanks to Perkins,—the silly old fool!

CHAPTER XIV

HOW WIVES DO REALISE SOME THINGS

I HAD a bit of luck that night. I got a bad attack of what they called influenza, and nearly died of it. Personally I knew, of course, it was nothing of the sort. It was brain-fever; the first comes from germs, the second from worry and overwork. I'd had the worry all right, I think you will at least admit that, and this wretched book has proved the last straw for the poor camel.

It may read as if it's done lightly and easily, that's my art and doggedness, but it's been the very dickens from the first. Try and do it yourself! Then there was the hiding of it. I haven't a hole or a corner that Gertrude doesn't keep in order for me. If I put this in a drawer or cupboard Gertrude would find it and read it—trust a woman for that—and be wiser than I meant her to be. She might not think I had done her justice; she might want to mess round with the grammar and things.

Fortunately, I thought of a safe place in the end. I hid it in my trouser-press, standing up

carelessly in my wardrobe. Even Gertrude would not think of looking inside that. Therefore, it was safely out of sight when I was taken ill.

I started with shivering in the drawing-room and Gertrude said:

"Did you remember your overcoat last night?"

I had not remembered it.

Then I got frightfully hot and my face blazed. Gertrude looked at me curiously; perhaps she thought I had been drinking again. A husband is never given the benefit of the doubt.

My head got to feel very funny, and I thought I might as well get to bed. I fainted at the top of the stairs, and Gertrude came running up. I came round to hear her say: "Don't let the servants see you like this. Pull yourself together and I will help you into your dressing-room."

I set my teeth and pulled myself together, not that I should have minded who saw me like that. I had got past caring. Gertrude however seemed very put out at the idea.

She helped me to get to bed, but not as if she much cared for such an unaccustomed job. In fact, she pulled off my coat quite roughly and flung it down anyhow. I remember putting my face down on the pillow, but I don't remember much more. I seemed to be in a nightmare. Gertrude was fleeing from me in disgust and horror, running after a figure in the distance that was

sometimes the Vicar and sometimes John. I remember how surprised I was to see how the Vicar could sprint when put to it. How Gertrude's youthful nimbleness annoyed me! I was running after Gertrude for all I was worth, calling her name again and again. "Gertrude! Gertrude! Gertrude!" Once I thought I heard her say "Yes, Billy!" But when I looked I could see nothing. Then came pain and more pain, and a dragging weakness.

As a matter of fact, I believe I had a mighty close shave. It was not till I was slightly better that I realised things. Gertrude never seemed to leave me, and that helped me most, I think. Once or twice, however, I woke to find her gone, and it nearly killed me. So the bad dream was true! However, she would come back, and I would doze again.

I remember one day that I felt more collected. Things came back to me, bitter things some of them. I looked at my hand, thin and white; I tried to turn and found it impossible. I made the effort of coherent speech. I looked up at Gertrude and said:

"You will soon get a change after all."

I don't remember what happened after that, for the effort was too much and I collapsed.

I have been told that when people stand in the Valley of the Great Shadow all their past life unrolls itself before their eyes. I hope that is not

true; it would be a rather premature Hell for some. What was this thing that I had done? What had I said or left unsaid? Had Gertrude and I quarrelled after the harmony of twenty years and the friendship of forty? The things I thought about were the little trivial things. I wanted to know how many collars I had in the wash. Was my trouser press safe? Had Rawson sent any urgent message? Had anybody else sent any urgent message? How many tenpences were there in ten thousand pounds? The silly questions I was always asking, questions which so few could answer!

Then one day when I was out of danger, I got it into my head that it was all up with me. I had been left alone, and I had decided to get out of bed, and see how they were getting on in the garden. As soon as I had put my legs to the ground they crumpled up like pulp. I got back into bed, but mentally I gave up the ghost. No wonder Gertrude had been so cheerful these last few days! She was going to have the time of her life presently.

I cried piteously over my own demise, picturing most harrowing death-bed scenes of which I was always the hero, saying beautiful, noble, and most touching things. I wish I could think of some of them to put down here, for you would admire them I know; think them splendid and real literature. "I am dying, Egypt, dying" was nothing to it. Not that there's anything of the Cleopatra about

Gertrude. However, as I got better they all went.

It was a sort of melancholy enjoyment, of course. Then I got to dislike the idea of departing. What was fifty? The prime of life. Who was the fool who said that a man was finished at forty, or ought to be finished? He must have lived a very careless life to feel like that. Fifty seems to me the ideal age. I was as young as ever in my heart, while the strenuous years lay behind; toil and struggle was over. There was nothing before me but to enjoy the leisure of my days and to see my family happy. I was just on the point of committing myself when Gertrude came in with my medicine and saved me. It was a most opportune interruption, for I got well without having to become an angel and repent too violently, and make good, but impossible, resolutions.

She stooped down, then she bent lower. "Why, Billy," she cried ever so tenderly, "what is it?" She stroked my hair and kissed me.

"You'll be able to stay on here just the same and enjoy yourself," I choked. "I am so glad."

"Oh, you Silly Billy! Why I could never enjoy myself without you!" She put her cheek against mine and murmured things that might not have been strictly true, but which were very pleasant to hear.

"But, I'm such an ass," I said.

"You certainly are a perfect donkey," she laughed.

I felt vaguely comforted even though the shadow still lay between us. One of the resolutions I had so nearly made was to explain everything from beginning to end—really explain I mean. I had precious nearly let myself in too, when she came and saved me. Why explain now? Far easier to drop the whole thing. Mrs. Smith would be gone long before I got about again, and things would revert to their usual condition.

"What I mean is," I groaned, "I know I'm an ass, don't you know, and yet I go on being an ass next time just the same. I suppose some people are made that way. I expect I've disappointed you a bit now and then, haven't I Gertrude?"

Mind you, there had been times when she had disappointed me, but I was not going to mention that.

She hesitated, sighed a little, smiled a little; then she said:

"Well dear, I've known you for forty years. I don't think I have ever put you up on a pedestal. I—it was in spite of what you were, not because of what you were. Oh, Billy, I've been *fairly* happy really." She put her head down by my side and cried bitterly. How illogical women are!

I stroked her pretty hair, and loved her dreadfully, but it didn't seem quite the time to mention it. I saw it all. She had put me on a ridiculous high pedestal—for Gertrude in her inner heart is

an idealist—and I had not always stayed up. I was not a god—I did not want to be—I was a human being with possibly a failing or two, and Gertrude like all women, had hankered after the god. I could not but feel it was a little unfair of her. I had not hankered after a goddess or an angel; Gertrude with all her little weaknesses was good enough for me. If I was well content with the ordinary woman, why was not Gertrude with the ordinary man—not that I consider I am as ordinary as all that. I have at least a temperament; as an author I have even the artistic temperament, and that is a thing Gertrude would never be able to lay claim to. Still, I couldn't stand her crying like that because I had fallen off the pedestal and got a little chipped.

When a man's ill he does silly things, and behaves like a fool where promises are concerned. He'll fling them about him anywhere—anyhow. He'll commit himself through physical weakness and feel jolly sick about it when he's well again. Anyway, I never could stand Gertrude in tears. She cries so seldom, but when she did it was so piteously, so heart-brokenly.

"I'll try to do better, Gertrude," I said, like the silly fool I was.

Then I began to feel almost well. "I can't make myself all over again at fifty," I explained,

"you'll. . . you'll just have to be content with a few repairs, Gertrude, old girl."

She gave a strangled sort of laugh. "If you were repaired too much I might not know you; it wouldn't be my own Billy, and that would be dreadful. Ah, if only the heart-part could be perfectly whole! I have always known, I have always known, and sometimes I felt it was more than I could bear! When there are two women, it is the one you marry who is always wrong; the other who is always right. One has the substance, the other only the shadow—and—and some people make two such tiny halves when divided."

"Oh, Gertrude, if you would just let me explain——"

She laid her finger across my lips. "For God's sake Billy, not now. I could not bear it."

Perhaps it was just as well after all. Explanations are tricky things to manage, I can tell you. Try yourself. You will soon find how they can run away with you.

One by one my family, including, of course, Tommy, were permitted to see me. Pam came first. She looked lovelier than ever, and her eyes seemed to shine more; like two stars glowing out in a dusky night. It was a very strange thing, but I was suddenly struck by a sort of likeness she had to Gertrude. It would be hard to define it, but it was there. The child had obviously taken after us both.

Somehow I found the idea peculiarly gratifying. She had that long slim figure with a sort of eager poise about it that I had always admired, perhaps envied a little. Now that I was so reduced by my illness, I might be nearer to it than I had ever been, if not actually very near.

"Silly Old Thing!" was all she said, but I realised she had missed me, and would be quite glad to have me about the place again. I wondered how she and Cecil Burn had been getting on. There is an adage that says when the cat's away the mice will play, but I did not care to think that of Pam. Besides, she played just the same when the cat was there.

I threw out a few casual hints. "Have you been doing anything that would make me specially mad?" I asked.

Pam, pale may be rather wonderful, but Pam pink is delightful. She was very pink indeed as she avoided my eyes, and said:

"Not while you were laid up, that wouldn't have been playing the game, but do hurry and get about again. It's seemed an awful long time."

"When I am about, my lady," I said, "we shall see what we shall see." The child must be weaned from her infatuation. Throw herself away on Cecil Burn she should not.

I wondered when she would tell me that Mrs. Smith had gone. Needless to say I was not going

to mention the subject first myself, but I was hoping all the time for the longed-for tidings. I suppose it was rather romantic and pathetic, but one has done with romance and pathos at fifty; it is apt to become a weariness of the flesh and sheer bathos by then. Besides, when I thought of all I had suffered one way and another on her behalf, Mrs. Smith did seem to me almost like a snake in the garden.

Pam never mentioned Mrs. Smith.

I asked her about Tommy; perhaps that would bring the subject up, but Pam only said how busy she always was.

"Does John help much in the garden?" I asked casually.

"Oh, he's awfully busy; he's learning all he can because of Haighlands, you see. I went over it yesterday. It's simply dinky."

I said I was glad she liked it so much, and she looked puzzled but changed the subject. Things seem to be going well, I thought.

Then came Rupert, very embarrassed.

"Hello, gov'nor," he said. "O.K. I hope?"

I thanked him, and said I was "O.K." Rupert is not growing up such a bad-looking boy. He is tall and has very good eyes, and rather a pleasant expression. I asked him if he was still digging.

He went very red and said he was, and that the motor-bicycle had given every satisfaction up to

date. He also spoke, with some incoherence, on the matter of flying, and his own studies. He said he thought the crammer would "land him" all right. One felt so much fresher after a holiday. He added inconsequently that he had heard of several men marrying on obtaining their commission. He thought everybody ought to do their duty to their country in every way at such a time. Things were not looking as he cared for them to look, or intended them to look once he got goin' . . . .

After Rupert, Tommy. She was looking very brown, but still worried. She did not mention her mother. Indeed, she did not mention anybody. She just talked "garden," but her interest seemed less keen, I thought. I quite understood it. She was mentally gardening at "The Haighlands." I asked her casually if she thought that garden would want a lot of putting in order. She was charmingly frank, and explained that John was taking to gardening like a duck to water, and she thought he'd soon get it shipshape. I could not avoid a sly dig:

"He will have a lady-help, I fancy?"

She became shy then and changed the subject, telling me how enthusiastic Pam had become and how really good at it she was proving. Then she went away and John appeared.

He was very glad to see me again, no doubt of that. I felt happy and at ease; little devil doubt

was laid aside. I had weaned him from Gertrude, soon he and Tommy would be married, and now I had only to finish weaning Pam off Cecil Burn and I could lay down my weapons and rest, conscious of great works performed.

As he did not mention Mrs. Smith either, I asked him directly when she had gone.

He said she had not gone.

"Not gone?" I repeated blankly, feeling suddenly very much less eager to be up and about.

John shook his head and said nothing. I could have groaned aloud. I was not out of the wood yet, it appeared, and just as Gertrude seemed about to understand me better.

"She must find it rather dull at present?" I observed.

John looked at me gravely. "She goes into Grandford every day," he said, "and does not get back till the last train."

"Has she taken something up?" I asked eagerly. "Munitions or anything?"

"She gambles," he said curtly, "hand in glove with the Blore crew."

"But they are so disreputable," I exclaimed.

John's kindly mouth took on an unpleasant expression. "Like to like,' he said. "Blore's just been divorced for the second time."

The mention of any poor fellow getting divorced

upset me. I felt very upset altogether. So Mrs. Smith was using that two hundred for gambling.

"Is she winning?" I asked eagerly. Surely if she won she would want to spend her money in a gayer place; live in something less tiny than the lodge.

"I don't know," retorted John, his voice rather curt, "nor care!"

"But *I* care," I said, "I want her to win. It matters a lot to me whether she wins or loses."

"I'm sorry you feel like that,' he replied, and changed the subject. He seemed put out about something, I thought.

"I was glad to hear from Pam there's been no advantage taken of my absence," I said. "I must thank you for seeing to it, old man. Must have kept you on the run a bit, I fancy."

"It's been most infernal," he began, and then stopped abruptly. "I shan't be able to stand it much longer," he said.

"When I'm there I can act watch-dog myself," I ventured.

"You are still opposed to the idea?"

"More opposed than ever."

He got up rather abruptly, and went.

It was not long before I was downstairs again. Everything seemed extra nice, I thought. I do not think I had realised before what a very perfect home I had, or how well it was kept.

"Rather jolly getting down again," I said to Gertrude.

She smiled at me, "I think it's rather jolly too."

It occurred to me that Gertrude realised how near she had come to suffering the irreparable loss, and that, though I might not be up to much, I was yet her husband of twenty years, her friend of forty, and that things might be a dashed sight worse anyway.

CHAPTER XV

HOW WIVES DISCOURAGE ONE'S EFFORTS

IT was really jolly to feel better than I had ever felt in my life and to be out and about again, conscious that they were extra busy at the office and stewing there, and that my health needed another holiday.

But it was not jolly to realise Mrs. Smith was looking for me, and to be constantly on the alert to dodge her. I felt I owed it to Gertrude to dodge her. Fortunately there were only a few perilous hours. She left soon after lunch and did not get back till the twelve train at night by which time I was always in bed and asleep. She was not an early riser either. She only appeared about twelve, so that if I could be *non est* from twelve to three I was safe, and I usually managed it. I do not of course mean I managed not to see her, of course not, we saw her most days, but I mean I managed not to see her alone.

Still I was worried. The crumpled rose-leaf remained.

When the average woman is worried, she is

worried all the time. She has no attention to give to anything or anybody else, but I am made of stronger things. I still plough my furrow. Mine was a big worry, those of women are often trifles——

Gertrude interrupted me to say in her rather inconsequent way that husbands were not trifles.

I dropped the discussion on worry with Gertrude, and continue it here in private, but my trouser press is now in daily use. What I mean is this: I wasn't selfish or self-centred or tiresome because I was worried. I went on attending to everybody else's matters.

I worked at the John and Tommy affair. I weaned Pam off young Burn some days by encouraging it, other days by damping it. My health would not of course permit me more than a little light work in the garden, but I did my two hours like a man. Besides all this I found time to be a devoted husband to my wife who was learning to appreciate me at last, so that I used to feel awfully happy at times. At other times however things would happen to upset me very much, clouds would arise, and Gertrude would refuse to understand. If years of self-control had not brought their reward my temper might have suffered; as it was, it seemed to me that only the tempers of others suffered. I spent myself for others and was prac-

tically given to understand they would much rather I didn't.

To be an ideal husband and father requires infinite tact and philosophy. One must remember that virtue will be your only reward, and one mustn't abuse virtue. You must also remember that those you have saved from marriage will always hate you, and perhaps those you have married will get to dislike you too later on. The path of self-abnegation is indeed a thorny one. It is very different from the primrose path.

Then one day I went to see if Rupert had finished his bit, and found the bit unfinished and no Rupert. I turned to Pam. "Why has Rupert stopped digging?" I asked.

Pam giggled, "He's guessed," she said.

"The lazy young devil!" I exploded. I knew who was going to be asked to finish it.

"He *is* in a tearer about it I can tell you——"

"Suppose I neglected my work for such trifles where would you all be?" I demanded sternly.

"Just where we are, I expect," she returned idiotically. "Dad, he's like a bear with a sore head, and he's going to do eighty miles an hour to-day and be. . . .bothered to anybody that gets in the way. He says he's been had; that he's been made to dig on false pretences. He says he knows there's a law against it, but he'd rather take him on with the hoe. You know what boys

are! I'm so afraid Cecil will take him on for a lark. Oh, dear, aren't men-things silly?" She gave an exasperated sigh.

"You do not seem to realise that I am a 'man-thing,'" I said grimly.

"I do."

"You will be calling your father silly next."

"Oh no 'Old Thing': your actions speak for themselves."

I puzzled over this ambiguous sentence for a moment or two, then I gave it up. She could not possibly mean what I had thought she had meant.

Suddenly she sidled up against me, "Do you believe in love?" she murmured shyly.

"Of course," I said, "there is nothing like it."

"In . . . in first-sight love?" she demanded.

"No," I said emphatically. I had walked into love with Gertrude. There had been no 'first-sight' folly in the matter. Considering I was ten when I first knew her that would hardly have been likely.

Then I remembered the wretched child imagined herself in love with Cecil Burn. Her first sight of him upside down in my pear-tree, how she had raved about his looks and legs even then.

"I believe in sensible mature love," I said gravely, "not the absurd calf love that all young things go through. I can assure you my dear," and I spoke with feeling, "that if people married what they imagined their first love, there would be

more suicides than there are. The sooner calf love is got over the better——"

"That's all right," said Pam, "I've had it badly —twice."

That school again of course! Putting such ideas into children's heads!

"The third time ought to be O. K., oughtn't it?" she asked. She glanced anxiously up at me, and I thought she was looking less radiant than usual.

"You let your imagination run away with you," I said kindly if firmly. "You are not in love my dear; you only think you are."

"I know what I am or aren't," she said, "it isn't as if I haven't had the experience. Dad were you ever in love?"

"Never!" I said hurriedly.

"Does the mater know that?" she asked. What a child she was for making things difficult!

"I meant never to count—till I got married of course," I corrected myself. Now-a-days it is the child who questions the parent, and doesn't much mind what form the questions take.

"Who were you in love with when you got married?'

"Your mother of course." I eyed her sternly. What ideas modern children get!

"Does she know that?" demanded my daughter. "Or are you keeping it for a pleasant surprise?"

I controlled my exasperation, "Run away," I

commanded, "but not to the kitchen-garden." I had shepherded John and Tommy there. However when I arrived later I found Tommy there alone—being hindered by Cecil Burn. I gave a sigh of utter exasperation. As soon as I found John I lost Tommy; when I had found Tommy I lost John. It was like going round in a circle all the time and never coming to anything.

I went and found Gertrude who was sitting on the lawn. I flung myself at her feet. "I am worn out," I complained.

"Poor dear!" She patted my shoulder. "But you work too hard Billy. You give yourself no rest." I was astonished to hear her say that; she had never said it before. Undoubtedly Gertrude was beginning to really understand me at last.

I held her hand and put my weary head in her lap. "I *can't* rest," I said. "You little know what is going on all around you, darling. Everything on my shoulders. Sometimes the burden is too heavy."

"Dearest, drop it."

"*What!*" I was startled.

"Drop the burden."

"I wish I could," I sighed, but I had no intention of dropping it till I arrived at my destination, "I'm getting on, I'm getting on," I added as much to encourage myself as anything. "It's slow work but I'm nearing the goal."

I often wished I could catch sight of the beastly goal.

Everybody knows what lovers are. The ostrich is nothing to them. They have an idea that nobody notices anything. All couples expect you to be enormously surprised when they announce their engagement. "Aren't we clever," their attitude says, "to do it all without a soul guessing?" They are not only surprised at your lack of surprise but annoyed about it. An awful doubt overwhelms them: have they been as unnoticed, as private, as they supposed? Some of the bloom of the coming marriage is rubbed off there and then: the rest is rubbed off later.

Pam and Cecil Burn might put their heads in the sand and say:

"Go away please. You are quite wrong—we're not here at all really. The thing you see sticking up on the shore is merely the flora peculiar to the district." Well, that attitude may deceive some people but I am not one of them. I can see as far through a stone wall as most, perhaps even a little further.

How I worked! How I slaved! How I perspired! I was growing almost too slim and was rather astonished Gertrude had not noticed it, and become alarmed. At fifty one should be a man of substance in every sense of the word. I would talk to John about Tommy for hours though it was dif-

ficult to think of something to say all the time, and I daresay I repeated myself. I feel sure I must have told him quite three times what an advantage it would be for Haighlands to have a mistress so interested in gardening, though I did not put it as crudely as that. Then I would talk to Tommy about John. That was easier and much less strain on the invention. I had known him thirty-two years, and women like anecdotes about their lovers. I filled the girl up with anecdotes. I wonder how many John would have recognised.

What did I get for it? The wretched hypocrites would affect a bored and resigned expression and break away at the first opportunity, not that they waited for an opportunity: they made it.

Have you ever been to Ireland? This is not so irrelevant as it sounds. The thing I mean can only be seen in its true aggravating manner in that country. There is a big market town, and not far from it is the cross roads that lead to all true Irish market towns. There has got to be four roads so as to give your pigs a little fun. There is the road in front of you, straight ahead, leading to the market. Nothing but a pig would ever notice there were other roads at all. Yet all the time their twinkling eyes are taking in the fact that there is the one behind them you have driven them down, one to the right that looks interesting, one to the left they think might lead to something. The one

in front does not appeal to them somehow. They have made up their mind about that even before they arrive at it. They also take in a hedge or so; a field or two.

All goes well till the cross roads and the critical period is reached. Then everything goes wrong and contrary—as also do the pigs. A few scatter to the right, more to the left, several back to their little wooden huts which they find they cannot leave after all, and the fields make the acquaintance of the rest. I have seen this thing in England, it is true, but not in the same state of perfection in which I have witnessed it in Ireland. It used to be a favourite amusement of mine. It never occurred to me to be sorry for that harassed swineherd. I rather think I laughed at him.

Well, I can feel for him now.

I get John and Tommy, my heart beating high with hope, to the cross roads. I coax, I urge, I am diplomatic. I point out what a pleasant prospect lies before them. They imply that they see nothing to interest them ahead. John is slinking off to the right, Tommy has gone to the left.

The simple life is all very well for simpletons. A gooseherd is picturesque. There is even something about a shepherd that appeals to me, provided the Spring and lambs have come out, and the time of snow and Winter is gone. I do not think it would be hard work to carry a lamb about now

and then, and herd the sheep. They always get herded the same way at least, and the dog does the rest. I had no dog to help me in this far more difficult job.

But the swineherd? In fairy tales he married the king's daughter because he was the youngest son, but king's daughters had queer tastes in those days, and seemed to get themselves hard put to it for husbands. Nowadays one never sees any notice of swineherds being married at all, not even in the *Morning Post* where the relicts and daughters of Chicago Pork Kings are for-ever leading someone to the altar—I nearly made a cheap joke and said slaughter. The life of a swineherd is devoid of romance and hope. He believes in nothing,—how can he? He is born, not made, and born a pessimist at that. I am certain that our asylums are largely peopled with swineherds—probably imagining themselves the swine who are having all the fun—and that those outside the hospitals and asylums never live to draw their old age pension.

This is what is called a digression I believe in literary circles. I don't know what the publisher will call it. He is a most particular man as I have found out to my cost. He showed me the first pages of my MS. which he had corrected, that is to say taken things out of, put others in; altered all the grammar and punctuation, and most of the

spelling. It is not too much to say it was all alteration and no MS.

Still this is the point: get my pigs to market I could not. Then there were two other little pigs set on getting to market somehow, while I was equally set on scattering them right and left. Oh, Fate that scattered Tommy and John, and let Pam pass on ahead with Cecil! I never knew which to run after first. As John and Tommy scuttled right and left, Pam and Cecil legged it for all they were worth to Market Town.

While Gertrude just sat on the lawn and sewed or read! Women have all the soft jobs of life whether they recognise it or not. I don't think Gertrude recognised it as much as she might have done.

I would go for encouragement and help and she would only say how hot I looked and beg me to rest.

Then John always used to talk to Mrs. Smith when she appeared, keep close to her side, escort her back again. So like a friend. Warns you, then falls into the trap himself! She had got another new dress, and what was John but an unsophisticated bachelor? When he was not with Mrs. Smith he was with Gertrude, with Pam somewhere about to keep cavé as it used to be called. Really it was not good enough.

Anyway you must be very stupid if you haven't learned exactly what I mean about getting one's

pigs to market. I once heard one woman say to another of a mutual and absent friend, "Well, she brought her pigs to a queer market, didn't she?" I wondered what she meant: I rather fancy I know now.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW WIVES ARE INCURABLE OPTIMISTS

I CAME upon Pam with Togo clasped in her arms. She was weeping over him copiously, and confiding to him that she could not bear it. Togo seemed to think it a poor game.

"My God!" I gasped. "Who has he bitten now?" Since the young men have been combed out—not with a very fine comb as yet—we find it increasingly difficult to get our food delivered. In one instance it had come to this, that a certain thing I was partial to, I had to fetch myself. Perkins who disliked it could never find the time. The others said it was a thing I was much better without and refused to encourage me.

I signalled to her to tell me the worst. The tears but fell the faster.

A dreadful thought occurred to me. Togo had bitten the one crammer in the world who could win the trick for Rupert.

"He'll have to enlist and chance it," I said faintly, "as soon as he reaches the age. He'll have

to work up by merit." The idea depressed me. I was afraid it might be some time before my son shed distinction upon his family by becoming a Field-marshal.

"It's J. . . .John!" she sobbed.

"But I thought he was so attached," I got out. Togo had been devoted to John from the first. What an extraordinary prejudice to take against him all of a sudden! Had he got annoyed at sight of such a laggard lover? Had he realised his master's efforts at the cross roads and tried his best to help? Poor old fellow it was not his fault and most unfortunate, and after all who should say that John did not deserve it. It was just an excess of zeal.

"Have you rung up the doctor?"

"The doctor won't do me any good," she went on recklessly.

"I was thinking of John," I said, "surely if he's been bitten——"

"Bitten?" She looked up indignantly.

"You *told* me Togo had bitten John. I thought that was what you were crying about."

"I shouldn't have cried about a little thing like that," she returned. "I should have Red Crossed him and thrashed Togo."

"Then what *are* you crying about?" I exclaimed, trying to comfort her, "Tell your old Dad, and he'll put things right for you."

She clung to me and wept the harder. Togo departed thankfully after an imaginary rabbit. "You always got things for me when I was little," she said in a half-weepy, half-coaxing way, "but you were the dearest old Dad then. You spoiled me I suppose, and now you're afraid it will be bad for me, and *I* think girls ought always to be spoilt when they start, to make up for the afterwards. Fathers ought to spoil if only because husbands won't—at least the *ordinary* one won't——"

What was she thinking of? What did she mean —and want? Cecil Burn would be the sort of husband that only spoilt himself. There are far too many men like that. I know several. The only one who I felt would be different was John, and I did not yet quite know what John was after. He seemed as ready to spoil Gertrude as anybody.

I began to feel desperate. "Do stop crying," I begged. I knew if she went on much longer I should be making rash promises, giving the babe the knife to play with.

"I shan't stop crying till you promise to give in," said Pam, and, Oh dear, how like her mother she was at that moment! "I shall howl and howl if it takes a week for you to say I can—so there!"

She flung her arms round my neck almost strangling me, and ruining my collar, "Oh Dad, it's John. The old silly *won't* propose!"

"I know he won't—blank him for a fool!" I cried savagely.

She stopped crying and stared, "But Dad he wants to *awfully,* I can feel him absolutely dying to all the time."

I lost my temper and said some things I need not write down here, "Why doesn't he do it then? Aren't I doing all I can to make him? Perhaps he fancies I am trying to prevent him, eh?" I could not help feeling sarcastic about it.

Pam hid her face on my shoulder, "I rather think he does fancy something of the sort," she said in a very small voice.

"The idiot! The chance of his life. I've hinted, I've done anything I could except ask him outright. Blank it! I'll do that now and let's be done with this blanked hanky panky!"

She throttled me again, "I knew he only didn't because he thought he mustn't."

"Some people don't seem to have the apparatus to think," I exclaimed exasperated. I was pleased that Pam wanted it too. Odd that I should have got the impression that she was prejudiced against the marriage!

"You want it to come off, eh?" I asked, "You fancy having the run of Haighlands, monkey?" I pinched her cheeks which turned bright pink under the infliction. She ran away there and then.

I went and looked for John. The sooner the

thing was settled the better. Half of my work would be over, my well-earned rest with Gertrude in the shade well in sight. I could not but feel how skilful I had proved as the arbitrator of Destiny.

John was with Gertrude and I had literally to drag him away. He came most unwillingly.

"I've seen the kitchen-garden three times to-day, old man," he said before I could speak, "everything is growing very nicely, but I don't think I need look for any difference before tomorrow."

"I only want to talk to you, to tell you something I think you ought to know."

He assumed his resigned expression. "I think I know almost more——"

"It's about the thing that lies close to your heart," I said very gravely. One has to talk in these idiotic sentimental terms to lovers, even quite old lovers. Let them think everything is going to be all right while you can, and remember that heart rhymes with dart, and dove with love. They are all old-fashioned in these matters.

John grunted.

"John, old man, I've guessed," I said dramatically.

He gave a great start and his face went scarlet. The ostrich was surprised that anybody had noticed it as usual. I hid my amusement and went

on, "You thought you were too old for her, twenty years between, that it would not be fair?"

"I thought that you thought—" he got out with difficulty, "I—I couldn't have stood it much longer. I was going to tell her with or without your permission——"

"Well, you've got my permission now," I said, "I only want you both to be happy. I am keen on it, Pam is keen on it—old chap go in and win!" I did not mention Gertrude because I was not so sure that she would be pleased. After all at her age admirers are few and far between. I wrung his hand.

He muttered something huskily, then he turned, "I'll go and find her," he said, and he had gone sprinting like a four-year old, looking as if he hardly dared believe the evidence of his own ears. John wasn't such a laggard lover after all when it came to the point—"Good luck!" I managed to shout after him. Well I knew the answer to the question—and I had got my pigs to market after all!

Surely the gladiator had earned his rest. I went and joined Gertrude in her nook.

"Whether you know it or not, my dear," I said, "you've a very clever husband."

"Do you mean the trouser-press?"

I avoided giving a guilty start with an effort, and told her I did not know what she meant; my

trouser-press was in its usual place, and contained its usual contents.

"It's not that," I added, "it's the other. Old Lady I've brought it off at last. He's just gone to propose to her."

Gertrude jumped as if shot, "Who has gone to propose to who?" she asked in suspiciously distressed tones, "Oh Billy, why must you meddle and everything going so perfectly?"

I answered her question, taking no notice of the other remarks, "John has gone to propose to Tommy at last. I don't mind telling you I insisted on it. He saw I would stand no more nonsense and he's gone."

She rose from her chair and all her pretty colour faded, "Oh no. . . .Oh no. . . . " she gasped, "it can't be true. You—you have done that too! Oh I can't bear it, I can't. . . ." She hid her face in her hands, trembling all over. "Three lives spoiled. . . .I could hate you for doing this. . . . !" She glared at me in a most unwifely manner.

I should have been angry I suppose, but I was too sick at heart for anger. How Gertrude had betrayed herself! Did she know it? Had it come to this, that she knew it and yet did not care?

"Gertrude," I began when I could speak, *"Gertrude. . . ."*

She took no notice, only grabbed my arm with both her hands, "You must stop it before it is too

late. I have stood much, but I will not stand this —I will *not,* I tell you!" No tigress in defence of her young could have been fiercer than Gertrude at that moment. The cow that had lost her calf and tried to gore me in consequence was nothing to her. Not for the first time I found myself married to a perfectly strange woman. Some men may like variety; personally I get a bit sick of it. I prefer to have my feet on firm earth, not on razzle-dazzles. Some writer, who probably thought himself much more of a big bug than I am in that line, said something about a wife being the bane *or* the blessing of a man's life. He should have said a wife is both, and always in the most illogical and unexpected fashion. Now that I have taken to writing myself to score off Rawson, I find lots of the old so-called wise sayings I can improve upon without an effort.

To have heard her you would have supposed me an officious little fool instead of a diplomat. I suppose the fact was, she did not realise what she was saying.

"John——" I began.

"I won't have John taken away from——"

I put my hand over her mouth, "You shall not say it," I cried fierce too. I only hoped John had got himself engaged and out of the way by this. Then perhaps Gertrude would learn reason. All the same things seemed a little blank to me. How could Gertrude and I be the same when the shadow

of the other lay between us? How wrong of wives to permit these shadows to occur, perhaps even to encourage them.

Was John really going to propose to anybody or had he only said that to throw dust in my eyes? He was in love with Gertrude,—why shirk facts however bitter?—and Gertrude was in love with John. Hadn't they raved about each other from the first? I wondered if he guessed that for all her slim figure and girlish complexion, she was my senior and thirteen years his. What a fool he would feel when he found that out! Serve him right. I had no sympathy for my erstwhile friend or pity either, I can tell you. I was just primitive man.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I cried.

"If there's one thing a woman can't bear it's having him propose to another woman first," she returned, "and how——"

"If Tommy accepts him he shall stand by it!" I returned between set teeth. "You've been encouraging it behind my back. Deny it if you can."

"I'm not going to deny it."

I was aghast. I had not expected her to brazen it out like this. "Have you no sense of wifely ——" I began.

"I'm sick of the word 'wifely,' why not 'husbandly' for a change. I'm to be your idea of a wife to you, merely another name for worm, but

you are never to be my idea of a husband to me——"

"I'll shake you in a minute!" I cried.

"I'd like to see you try!"

I tried.

"You would have spoilt my life if I had let you," she went on, "only a woman is a fool to let a man spoil her life—he's never worth it! Not content with that you are trying to spoil——"

"Sport?" I sneered, "Yes Gertrude, and I mean to have a damned good try too!"

Then she stamped her foot at me—at me her husband! "Go—go to your Mrs. Smith," she cried, "Don't think I care!"

"She isn't my Mrs. Smith!" I cried enraged at this inconsequence.

"Your dear dark Rosaleen then," she said in tones I cannot describe, and looked at me in a way I cannot describe either. I would not have believed it of Gertrude, but an infatuated woman will do anything. Perhaps I got a little heated too.

"And you," I said rather loudly, "you may go to—to——"

I don't know who I was going to bid her go to, certainly not to John. She finished the sentence for me, and in a shocking fashion.

"To the devil I suppose you mean," she interrupted, "well, I've half a mind to go, if only to show you that I could go yet, even if you suppose

I shouldn't have the chance!" She flung back her head and looked just like the tragedy queen repulsing the villain. "Oh it would almost be worth it—if only to make you look silly!" She put up her chin and her blue eyes blazed.

I stared at her in horror, and yet it seemed to me I had never seen such a beautiful majestic looking woman. No wonder John loved her! Who would want to look at anybody else when she was there? My wife—but a strange wife indeed! A wicked and improper woman, an unfaithful woman! In fact the limit, as any husband reading this will agree. What women are coming to these times! All this rubbish about giving them equal rights and allowing them to lead their own lives is breaking up the home. Suppose Gertrude went off to 'lead her own life' as she actually threatened, what about me? Who was going to look after the servants; who was going to make my early tea? Who would there be for me to be fond of? But that did not matter to Gertrude: probably she never gave it a thought.

Being in love with John was all that interested her. Anything could happen to me, and the sooner it happened the better. However I was not that sort of a man. I was master and meant her to know it.

I poked my face into hers—and a damn silly thing too as it happened——! "You as much as look at

the devil," I said, "and I'll thrash you within an inch of your life." Mind you I meant it. I could manage that all right.

It was then she slapped my face; such a slap! I had to hold my hand to my cheek, but I managed to mumble, "You *silly* ass, Gertrude!"

She rushed away there and then without another word, leaving me nursing my swelling face, and feeling—possibly looking for all I knew or cared—no end of a fool, but an angry dignified fool, mind you.

The harmony of twenty years destroyed by a rash woman's slap! The knowledge of twenty, nay forty, years! Where was it? I knew less of her than when we had started our married life together with such high hopes on my part. Far, far less—I was forced to the conclusion I did not know her at all. We were 'Strangers Yet' as the song has it, and Gertrude was not even a well-behaved stranger.

I felt stunned, I did not care about anything any longer. The bottom had dropped out of my world with a vengeance. It seemed like the end of everything. Years of faithful service on my part—and this! All to go for nothing. I suppose she had never cared tuppence about me; just taken me for a home as so many women do; they want their house, their children; the husband has got to be thrown in, something to make the best of, half apologise to their friends for. She had never be-

longed to me in the sense that mattered; never could now. The pain in my cheek passed, but my heart was full of agony and rage. In unbearable anguish one longs to strike back. I think that was almost my chief feeling then. To get at John. To frustrate Gertrude's only too obvious intentions.

There had been an incident since the war that should have opened my eyes, an incident long before the coming of John. She had been ripe for him or for any man. She was sick, sick to death of me and all my ways. Yet at the time I had almost treated the thing as a joke.

A cardboard box from a Regent Street house appeared in her room. This was nothing new, but instead of opening it and showing me its contents before she broke to me the price of it, she seemed inclined to hide it away. At the same time she kept it always handy, in the ottoman at the foot of her bed. Once or twice when I looked inside the ottoman to see if the mysterious contents were on view, I found it tied up with string. It almost looked as if she was not keen on me seeing it.

As I do not believe in encouraging wives in either deceit or extravagance, I waited my opportunity and undid the box. The contents rather astonished me. They consisted of a robe *de nuit,* though even that word seems inadequate to express the glory, and uselessness, of the garment I viewed.

It was pale blue, fine crépe-de-chine I think, with

tiny little rosebuds most exquisitely embroidered upon it in palest pink, tied up with lovers' knots in blue. One sees the garment in bedroom scenes on the stage, but not in sober middle-class households I sincerely trust. At anyrate I feel sure that nobody would dream of sleeping in such a confection. The bill was there—ten pounds! There was a little lace inlet—real I conclude, or at least presenting that effect. With this was a sort of transparent lace mantilla which I realised was for the purpose of a 'dressing-gown.' Worn over the pale blue masterpiece it would be revealed in all its perfection through the filmy clouds of lace. There was a boudoir cap all embroidered pink roses on crépe-de-chine, with frills of lace.

I was staring at this revelation with my mouth open, when Pam came into the room.

"Why Dad," she exclaimed, and then broke off to say, "I hope the moon won't change while your face is like that!" She came and looked over my shoulder and stared too.

"Well I'm. . . . jiggered!" she said. She picked up the receipted bill and was jiggered some more.

"Mums must be getting up some theatricals for a surprise," she got out at last, "and this is the get-up for the Sleeping Beauty."

I was not satisfied with the explanation, or in the least surprised when no theatricals came off. In the end I tackled Gertrude.

She seemed annoyed at my curiosity, but had her story ready.

"Zeppelins," she said curtly, but no more.

Well, the Zeppelins came and we all rushed out into the road where quite a crowd had collected, many of them neighbours, all enjoying the free entertainment. Gertrude was one of the first to rush, but not in the attire she pretended to have bought for that purpose. I don't fancy now that she ever intended to waste it on Zeppelins. She wore her ordinary sensible night-gown and a sensible warm dressing-gown, and her head bristled with the usual preparations. Then she turned and blamed me. Why had I not reminded her? Just like a man to get in a panic and forget the one thing that really mattered! Here had she gone and missed an opportunity, which, alas! might never come again. She had determined to show the neighbours something. . . . to create an impression, and she had created the wrong sort of impression. That it had not been very nice for me did not seem to occur to her. I had led her back to the house in some haste, but not I fear before certain people had taken in various details.

The second time it was even worse. She forgot the dressing-gown. I could not but feel that my wife and the Germans combined had made me ridiculous.

Pam took me aside next day, and doubled up

with laughter, "Isn't it a good joke against poor mums?" she asked.

I said the humour did not appeal to me.

Pam exploded, "I believe it was a trousseau," she said, "and she's saving it up. Look out Dad, she's hoping to get married again!"

I had smiled at the time, but I did not smile now. Pam had spoken in jest, but she had hit it. Gertrude had been hoping to get married again. I was her junior, hale and hearty, but that made no difference. She did not give up hope. She bought her trousseau to be well before events. Oh the incurable optimism of wives!

Well I would show Gertrude it was not going to be as easy as all that.

"Mine own familiar friend.'

Gertrude had gone in search of him; I set out in search of Gertrude.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW WIVES AREN'T SO EASILY FOUND

THE first person I found however was Mrs. Smith. She came running into me. Then she grabbed my arm.

"Oh Billy at last! How they have guarded you my poor boy!"

I drew myself forcibly away, "You are mistaken," I said very coldly. What luck I have, haven't I? I had only to learn to look upon misfortunes as something to break the monotony of life, to tell myself that at least I was escaping dulness. Every moment was precious. Gertrude and John were probably together somewhere, she preventing him proposing to Tommy, and my Old Man of the sea had leapt out at me. How I loathed the dressed-up painted old hag!

"Oh Billy, I am in such trouble——"

I made to brush past. She caught my arm again.

"I am not interested in your troubles, Mrs. Smith," I retorted. She had brought hers on herself and on me. Mine had come upon me without any fault of my own like a bolt from the blue. I

was sick of trouble. I was drowning in a sea of it.

"Mrs. Smith," she echoed, "Oh Billy, you must not call me by that dreadful name——"

"Talking about names I would be obliged if you would address me by mine," I interrupted, and gave it her formally.

"But you haven't forgotten those dear old days?"

"I remember everything," I said, "a foolish boy, and the girl who encouraged him for her amusement. I remember he imagined himself in love, but the woman he fancied he cared for never existed. The real woman was just a flirt, some even said an adventuress. When the rich man came along she turned him down." I bowed to her, "I have to thank you for that," I added.

Her face went a sort of mottled shade, and she dropped my arm. There was a dangerous light in her eyes. "Does your wife know that you gave me two hundred pounds and were with me till midnight one evening?"

"She does," I answered.

I never saw a woman look so surprised in her life. So she had been going to threaten me with letting Gertrude know; I should have had to buy her silence as I was fool enough to try and buy her absence, but I was not quite such a fool as I had been. I was a little less blind, for I saw where weakness, cowardice, and unworthy deceit may lead one too. Vanity had flung me as it has flung many

a better and stronger man, but I did not mean to let it throw me again if I could help it. Between Gertrude and me was the great gulf set, but I could at least get rid of Mrs. Smith once and for all.

"Gertrude knows!" she gasped, "I don't believe it! You are lying."

"I trust I have ceased to lie," I retorted, "and also to shilly shally. I paid you that two hundred pounds to go away. If you do not go this week I shall put the whole thing in the hands of my solicitor."

"You forget the scandal," she snarled.

"Not at all," I replied, thinking how little one more scandal mattered either way, "I can face it myself. It is to be hoped you are also prepared to. A woman's reputation is more brittle I have heard. It depends upon what one has to lose, I suppose."

"You brute," she cried, "you brute!" And hit out blindly at me. But I was not to be caught napping a second time. One woman had smacked my face; I was not going to let another scratch it.

"Will you go or will you be turned out?"

"Oh, I do not need your miserable little hovel much longer, thank goodness. I can stay with Mr. Blore's sister. I am going to be married to Mr. Blore before long," she added triumphantly.

"Permanently or temporarily?" I enquired sardonically. Blore could never keep out of the

divorce court for a year. He had been divorced twice within three. Would Mrs. Smith divorce him or put up with his abominations? I decided she would do whatever paid her best. She would be the injured and respectable partner, and doubtless such a woman could play that card skilfully. I envied neither.

"You—you——" She burst into vigorous abuse. Then she turned her beastly tongue on Gertrude. "Oh, she's tamed you all right," she sneered. "Certainly she waited long enough for you. I knew she was ready to snap up another woman's leavings, that was why I would not let you go," she laughed horribly. "I made a fool of you—and her—for ten years. I hated her superior airs. But I got my knife into her. I took all your love and gave her the husk, and I took care she knew it! There was nothing about me and you she did not know, nothing, nothing! I wonder how long her infatuation lasted, not long, I fancy! How glad she must have been when your uncle died and made it worth while, for her idiotic love for you must have been pretty well dead by then——"

I thrust her blindly aside and ran, but as I ran her words echoed in my ears. Gertrude knew, had always known! Then what must she have thought of me? All the time she must have known how I was lying, how I was deceiving her: perhaps she

had even guessed how I had deceived myself, for I knew too late where my heart had lain, and all my happiness too. Oh, worse than fool that I had been, lower than reptile! No wonder she loathed and despised me, no wonder she had slapped my face! In twenty years she had slapped my face once, lost patience twice, and all the rest of the time how much she had borne and with what infinite patience! I had never realised it. I had never known the real Gertrude.

No wonder she cared for John! What a contrast to such as myself. Ought I to make it easy for her to go to him, ought I to get divorced via Mrs. Smith? The thought made me shiver. It was never an innocent man's duty to get divorced; it was always the duty of a woman to stay with husband and family provided they treated her properly. I was prepared to treat her properly enough now, Heaven knows!

If only I could find her! I came to the thick hedge, and I heard a voice, John's voice. He said:

"I have got you alone at last!"

Who had he got alone at last, Gertrude or Tommy? I wiped my face. Oh, what a fuss the whole thing put me into! How bad it was for me rushing about in the sun like this without my hat! Gertrude would have sent for my hat if she had known.

I leant up against the hedge too exhausted to move.

The reply, if any, was inaudible. Why on earth couldn't Tommy speak up, the little fool? Everybody was making it as difficult and as awful for me as possible.

"He said I might," murmured John rather huskily.

The double-dyed villain if he was talking to Gertrude! Said he might indeed!

A very low voice replied—Gertrude's voice, "Oh, I can't think what you mean?"

Couldn't think what he meant, couldn't she? How deceitful women are! She had deceived me, now she was deceiving John.

"It was love at first sight," he went on, "the moment I set eyes on you it was all over with me. . . . but I am such an old crock. . . . I suppose you will only laugh at me?"

That devil John was persisting in the matter. I waited to hear Gertrude laugh with my heart in my mouth. I waited in vain as I knew I should.

"I have never loved anyone else and never could," he went on, lying for all he was worth of course, "but I am so different, so different to what *your* husband——"

I felt it was something that he could see that at least. How could he care for Gertrude as I did? He had known her a matter of weeks, I for forty

years. Jacob and Rachel were nothing to me and Gertrude when you come to think of it. Why if I lost Gertrude I would be as maimed as a man who has lost all his limbs.

I will do Gertrude the justice to say she did not lead him on, she was indeed very silent—but even I could feel that it was an encouraging silence. She must have looked encouraging too, for he said:

"My own little girl! My precious wee darling!"

Nothing could have annoyed me more than that, and nothing could have been more ridiculous. Gertrude stands five feet eleven in her stockings.

She was too much in love to make any remonstrance it seemed, and I fancy he moved a step nearer. Women in love have no sense of humour.

"I shall hate Haighlands if you won't come and live there with me," he said boldly.

Well, that was plain enough! I gasped, I can tell you. So Gertrude would go and live with John at the Haighlands! Who would live with me at the Elms, and what would the neighbours say?

I thought I heard something like a gurgle in reply but I could not be sure.

Anyway I heard that unspeakable fool John—a middle-aged man!—say, "Will my birdie fly to her nest?" Really the fellow made me feel quite sick. I was too disgusted to feel enraged. What a way to talk to Gertrude of all people on earth, Gertrude who was so sensible and matter-of-fact, Gertrude

who scarcely knew the meaning of the word sentiment! I waited for her to slap his face. Instead I heard quite a different sound.

I don't know what the average deceived husband would have done under the same circumstances. I only know what I did. I burst straight through the hedge at them.

John was kissing Pam.

I remained there rooted to the spot. The sky was under my feet, the solid earth above my head. I staggered and gasped, and gasped again.

Someone gave me a push, an angry push; it must have been either John or Pam; I shall never know which. All I know is, they both glared at me as if I had no right in my own garden, and John said:

"Dammit! I could manage it without you."

I had no breath for reply. I was still on a sort of see-saw.

Pam was very pink, but her voice was sulky as she said:

"You told us we might get engaged, but we didn't want your help."

I heard a strange voice saying over and over again, "Thank God! Thank God!" I believe it was my own.

Then came Pam's startled, "Oh he's been running about without anything on and he's got sun-stroke!

How could mums be so absent-minded." She seized John's hat and rammed it on my head.

"Dad go in and get cool," she said, "You can tell mums about us if you like. She will be thankful it's settled at last and that you gave in like the old dear you are. I am so happy!" She kissed me. John wrung my hand.

"I never knew there could be such luck in the world for me!" he cried.

I could not find words so I left them. I believe they were quite satisfied with my conduct, and that they felt they could trust me not to look back.

I thought I had better tell Gertrude what had happened, but I could not find her anywhere in the garden. At last I sought for her in her own room and here I was more successful. At least when I knocked at the door, she said:

"Go away. I never want to see you again. I'm glad I slapped your face—so there!"

"So am I," I whispered, "Gertrude unlock the door and I will tell you why I am glad, and I will tell you something else to make you glad too."

"You have stopped poor Pam getting married to John I suppose," she returned, "or you think you have, but I am going to see that they get married if it means an elopement."

"They won't need to elope," I answered, "I have just been giving them my blessing."

Then Gertrude opened the door.

I had hardly began to explain before Pam came rushing up followed by John. They explained even more than I did. They said I had given them my permission, and Pam added, "I believe he wanted it all the time and that's the way he went to work. Oh, isn't Dad a dark horse?"

Gertrude turned to me, "Is that what you meant when you said I had such a clever husband? *Is* it Billy?"

"Why, of course," returned Pam before I could answer, "he would not go the obvious way to work, would you Old Thing; he would leave that to the obvious sort of people."

Then John and she disappeared and I was alone with my wife.

I put my arms round her, "Gertrude," I said huskily, "I love you dreadfully; do you think you could love me a little—futile ass as I am?"

"Oh *Billy*. . . . !"

We both ignored all that happened on the lawn. I think we both felt that explanations between people so long and happily married as ourselves were superfluous. Anyway I know I did.

"I've had a very tiring day," I said; "it's very tiring getting people engaged, I find. Then I had to clear out that Mrs. Smith," I could feel Gertrude start, "really I could not stick the sight of the woman any longer. I paid her two hundred pounds to clear out and she never cleared, but she was

always unreliable. When I was a boy she led me on to make a bit of an ass of myself, but, thank goodness, you married me, like the angel you were, and I was too busy being happy with you to think of the little cat."

"Oh!" cried Gertrude.

"She's made a dead set at me hoping for more money, but she happened to forget I'm not a boy any longer. I've got a little sense now, and I've got you Gertrude my own little girl. . . ."

I think those few moments were the happiest of my life. Then I remembered Tommy. I said something about her.

"Oh Billy, you won't be angry, but she's got engaged to Cecil Burn."

"How splendid!" I said when I could speak.

"You wanted that too," cried my wife, "Billy, how wonderful you are!"

I only wished I was. I knew what I really was right enough, but I made up my mind, that as Gertrude did not seem to have guessed it already, I might as well prevent her finding out. I started by doing everybody's bit in the garden. Gertrude made rather a fuss of me that evening. She seemed to be afraid I might over-do myself, but I did not mean to go quite as far as that. Nobody would wish to improve themselves out of recognition. It would be awful if Gertrude were suddenly to find herself married to a stranger. No, I meant to go

surely but I meant to go slowly—'slow and sure wins the day.'

I won't go so far as to say that nobody reforms at fifty—I happen to have the best reason for knowing that they do, within reason—but one could reform too far. Such violent reforms have violent ends. I realised one or two things I need not go into here. Some of them I cast away more or less; some of them I kept for old time's sake. The old coat is the most comfortable after all.

Gertrude was too big for vanity in all the sense of the word, but I alas! was not. Oh, the petty pitiful vanity of the little people! Those with a spark of greatness, the possibility of bigness, have not that to contend with, for vanity flies before greatness. Gertrude could be ridiculous, her Zeppelin-trousseau proved that, but she could not descend to anything so small as some of the things I had descended to—once.

When I said something of the sort she only laughed. She said she had her full share as a woman, and I had no more than my full share as a man; we were vain of different things that was all.

"What does anything matter now?" she asked, joyously. "Devotion, that is the chief stand-by. If you are sure of that, you are sure of everything that really matters. Your foundations are rock, not sand."

I thought she might be sure of that.

"Suppose," I said, "we lived in the very ancient days when anything might happen, and a genii suddenly popped up and offered me in exchange for you a really great bargain. Do you think I would take it?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Wouldn't that depend on the bargain?"

"He would offer me," I said, "the greatest contrast to you possible. Somebody not only beautiful in face and figure, but in character."

"Good gracious, Billy, and you would let a thing like that go for me?"

"I would," I declared, emphatically, "even if he offered to throw in brains." I think she understood all my meaning. "Of course," I added "the man who starts flattering his wife is laying up trouble for himself in the future, but there are times when we must risk even that. You understand that I consider this a sort of honeymoon, and that such things don't occur twice in well-regulated households."

"It being a honeymoon, I am taking steps to do what I should have done to make the first a success," she said. "Billy, I am having my hair 'Marcel waved'! It's permanent till the next time you have it done. Things happen just the same but without processes."

The results were excellent, and I strongly ap-

proved of the innovation. It saved us both a lot of trouble.

All the surprises of our belated honeymoon were pleasant ones. For instance, one day Gertrude came to me with her hands clasped behind her back. "Which hand will you have?" she asked.

I said the right.

She dropped five little packets into my hand. "Saved out of the housekeeping," she explained.

In each little packet was a tenpence! How much that helped and encouraged me! I had started out with the idea of buying her a yacht out of the proceeds, then I had come down to diamonds, then it had been a hat, but I still fear the poor girl won't get a hat out of it unless I make up the difference myself. It will come down to that refuge of the destitute, a "hanky," with an initial on it, such as are lost and joyfully destroyed in thousands annually in our laundries. But undoubtedly this four-and-eightpence was a help.

Gertrude and I had the lawn for our "honeymoon," Pam and John the rose-garden, and Tommy and Cecil—a nice fine lad!—the cabbage patch. A fair division all round, I thought. What ideal engagements they are! We shall have Pam and John always close, and never lose either; some day we may even have their children. Gertrude, as is the way of women, is already counting on that. She has christened a boy and a girl already; I do

not quite agree with her choice of names, and sometimes we have almost a little argument about them. Then Gertrude reduces me to her way of thinking by "supposing" I want the girl called Rosaleen.

Poor old Rupert is rather out of it. I should be sorry for the boy if it were not that his is the love that passeth the love of woman; that of a young man for his first motor-bicycle. He is busy breaking the records, and rather fancies the profession of despatch-rider. You can take more risks when the W.O. have to make good. Cecil is to be married before he flies for the Front, and Tommy will stay and garden till he returns. He is highly spoken of in influential quarters, I hear, and I am not surprised. I always felt that boy would make good somehow from the moment he alighted so gallantly in my pear-tree, which is fruiting well after all.

Well, I have come to the wind-up at last, thank goodness! and I defy Rawson to say I have not kept his conditions like a man. I seem to have wasted a lot of time talking about potty little things, not potty to me perhaps, but potty to you who read them, I'm afraid. There were such different things to be written of, were there not? But that is not for me—not because I feel too little, but because I feel too much. While the big things crash around us, the foundations of empires are shaken, and change has become the order of our day, the lives

of those of us who are out of it go on much the same. Out there, or on the sea, the nations strive together in death grips, but we make just the same fuss about our toothache.

At least, unlike the poor old Vicar, I know where to leave off. He is worse than ever, and even Gertrude—the most long-suffering of women—can hardly hide her boredom when the old dodderer comes to call. I'm afraid his unfortunate wife has had to see quite a lot of him lately.

Which reminds me: Togo got so bored with the three sets in the garden, all too absorbed to notice him, that he went off on a sudden inspiration and bit the village constable. I'm afraid that it's going to take a great deal more than a drink or two and a pound or two, to put that right, but there's no use meeting trouble half-way, and he's not yet in a condition to see about it.

So here we are at the end of our journey; all of me, but I wonder how many of you! The old 'bus has held out till it reached its destination whatever the passengers have done. The driver thinks he'll let other fellows drive 'busses in future. It hasn't proved all that he hoped, or quite so easy —not by a long chalk it hasn't! He's more than fed up, if you've got to know; his muscles are tired and his brain is tired. He's long past the stage at this time o' night of caring a damn what's happened to the passengers either; where they are, or

what they think about it, and what's more he prefers not to know.

He only wants his bit o' supper, his bed, and his wages, pore old chap!

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